

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

*Systemic Pressures, Party Politics and Foreign Policy:  
Serbia Between Russia and the West, 2008-2020*

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## **DECLARATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since 2008 Serbia maintained its relations with the West, meaning the EU and the US while nurturing partnership with Russia, even though it has an interest in joining the EU. This thesis examines the causes of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West in the period between 2008 and 2020. The thesis determines the causal factors behind Serbian balancing act and factors that account for differences in the intensity of this policy during different historical stages. The analysis uses the causal mechanism of the neoclassical realism (NCR) where the individual behaviour of the state is determined by the international systemic processes (independent variable) that are translated through unit-level factors (intervening variable). The thesis methodologically relies on process tracing, case study and analytical narrative. The research was based on the analysis of secondary source materials, like empirical and theoretical literature, media material and think-tank reports. More importantly, the study is based on primary source material collected through fieldwork in Serbia, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 stakeholders. There are four arguments offered within this study. The first is that the independence of Kosovo is the first systemic process shaping Serbian policy as Serbia became closer to Russia from that point. The second is the lack of permanent US interest in the region, and the inability of the EU to enlarge generated a power vacuum in the Balkans that acts as the second systemic process. In that vacuum, there was a permissive environment for Russia to act more assertively and in which Serbia gained an incentive to balance and play Russia and the West against each other. Third, the difference in the intensity of Serbian balancing act is determined by the state of relations between Russia and the West, where if the relationship becomes more confrontational Serbia is even more inclined to hedge its bets and continue its balancing. Fourth, the party politics in Serbia also shapes balancing act acting as the intervening variable as foreign policy becomes used in the domestic struggle for turf.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>General Acronyms and Translations</i>	
BIA	Bezbednosno-informativna agencija (Security Intelligence Agency)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOS	Demokratska opozicija Srbije (Democratic Opposition of Serbia)
DS	Demokratska stranka (Democratic Party)
DSS	Demokratska stranka Srbije (Democratic Party of Serbia)
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
G17 Plus	A defunct liberal-conservative political party
GRU	Glavnoje Razvedyvatel'noje Upravlenije (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IPAP	Individual Partnership Action Plan
IR	International Relations

ISAC	International and Security Affairs Centre
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KSF	Kosovo Security Forces
LDP	Liberalno demokratska partija (Liberal Democratic Party)
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
NIS	Naftna industrija Srbije (Petroleum Industry of Serbia)
NSPO	NATO Support and Procurement Agency
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PARP	Planning and Review Process
PfP	Partnership for Peace
RISI	Rossiiskii institut strategicheskikh issledovaniĭ (Russian Institute for Strategic Studies)
RT	Russia Today (formerly)
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka (Serbian Progressive Party)
SOCA	Serious Organised Crime Agency
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
SPO	Srpski pokret obnove (Serb Renewal Movement)
SPS	Socijalistička partija Srbije (Socialist Party of Serbia)
SRS	Srpska radikalna stranka (Serbian Radical Party)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



URS	Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije (United Regions of Serbia)
US	United States
USA	United States of America
ZSO	Zajednica srpskih opština (Association of Serb Municipalities)

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*Dedicated to my father, Miško Vuksanović (1950-2019).  
Thank you for giving me everything and more than that.*

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Defining the Puzzle, Research Question and Hypothesis

Since its inception, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has tried to uncover the forces behind sovereign states' international behaviour. Why did state A launch a war with state B? Why did state C, unlike state A, decided to establish diplomatic relations with state B? What interests does state D pursue and with what means? At the time of writing, the UN has 193 Member States;<sup>1</sup> which means there are 193 internationally recognised sovereign nation-states. Regardless of their differences in size, power capabilities, geography and culture, each one of these states has its interest in the international system. These states promote those interests through the specific policy instruments at their disposal. In short, every one of these states has its foreign policy. In a way determining causality behind the behaviour of an individual state appears as a commonsense task.

However, some states engage in policy behaviour that constitutes an empirical puzzle that demands rigorous analysis of the forces causing that behaviour. The case of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West is just that type of puzzle. After the regime of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in 2000, widespread predictions were made that Serbia would along with the other countries of Eastern Europe join the institutions of the transatlantic community, like the EU and NATO. Goran Svilanović, the first post-Milosevic Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), in his 2001 speech in the Federal Assembly, stated openly: "The basic foreign policy orientation of the FRY is directed towards European and Euroatlantic integration processes."<sup>2</sup> However, the word Euroatlantic slowly disappeared from the official documents and policy narrative in subsequent years.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'United Nations – Member States', *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/member-states/index.html>, accessed: 28-02-2021

<sup>2</sup> Nataša Dragojlović, Stanislav Sretenović, Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović (eds), *Spoljna Politika Srbije: Strategija i Dokumenti* (Serbian Foreign Policy: Strategies and Documents), (Belgrade: 2010), p.287

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with a former high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

As opposed to the initial ambition to pursue fully pro-Western foreign policy, starting in 2008, Serbian foreign policy began to drift through different stages, summarised in various sloganeering political terms used by its political elites. The Euroatlantic integrations were replaced with European integrations to avoid a reference to NATO. New phrases also began to be used by Serbian elites, like: “both Europe and Kosovo” (opposing Kosovo’s independence while pursuing the policy of European integrations); Serbia that is “East to the West, and West to the East”; four pillars of Serbian foreign policy (Russia, EU, USA, and China). This policy lasts to this very day. However, for the sake of analytical precision, it was necessary not just to define the starting date of the empirical phenomenon but also the empirical conclusion. While the Serbian balancing act carries on in 2021, the year 2020 provides a closing timeframe on which a sound analysis based on a conceptual framework can be conducted.

In her 2020 keynote address in the Serbian Parliament, Serbian PM Ana Brnabić outlined Serbian foreign policy goals: “Serbia’s main foreign policy goal is EU accession, the best framework for overall reforms, modernisation, and development of Serbia. ... At the international level, Serbia will continue to pursue a policy of respect, friendship and partnership with the People’s Republic of China, to maintain traditionally friendly relations and strategic cooperation with the Russian Federation, as well as to work diligently to improve and build better relations with the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Serbian strategic documents are based on the same set of proclaimed goals, showing how deeply embedded this policy of balancing between Russia and the West really is. In 2019, the Serbian National Security Strategy emphasised the Serbian desire to join the EU while simultaneously stressing strong ties with the US and Russia as essential for Serbian national interest.<sup>5</sup> The previous National Security Strategy from 2009 is based on the same set themes,<sup>6</sup> showing that the policy of simultaneously pursuing close ties with the

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Keynote address of Prime Minister Designate Ana Brnabić’, *The Government of Republic of Serbia*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/130345/keynote-address-.php>, accessed 04-03-2021

<sup>5</sup> ‘National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia’, *Ministry of Defence Republic of Serbia*, 27 December 2019, p.7, <http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/4350/strategije-4350>, accessed 04-03-2021

<sup>6</sup> ‘National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia’, *The Military Intelligence Agency*, October 2009, p.21, <http://www.voa.mod.gov.rs/documents/national-security-strategy-of-the-republic-of-serbia.pdf>, accessed 04-03-2021

West and Russia survives irrespective of the passage of time or government changes in Belgrade.

This language points to a certain lack of strategic thinking. These statements and doctrinary documents resemble a wishlist of goals Serbia pursues, rather than a strategically- and analytically-based policy with a clear set of priorities. So, this is a country that is an EU membership candidate, expected to become aligned with the EU, wants to pursue a partnership with Russia, irrespective of whether the EU and Russia are on the same page. The task may be even more demanding in the case of the US and Russia. How can one hope to have a good relationship between two powers that are frequently clashing?

This dilemma is not just reduced to government officials' statements and formulations in the policy documents. In practice, the Serbian policy appears even more contradictory. At the end of 2014, Serbia, based on its Partnership for Peace membership (PfP), adopted the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of partnership that a country not aspiring to become a member can have with NATO.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, Serbia was visited by NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg.<sup>8</sup> However, that same year, Serbia started participating in the trilateral military exercise "Slavic Brotherhood", alongside the Russian and Belarus military, amidst West-Russia tensions over the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Serbia balancing its EU aspirations and partnership with Russia equally burdens the country's behaviour. A powerful case in point is Serbia's persistent refusal to join the EU sanctions against Russia over its involvement in the Ukrainian conflict. As then Serbian Foreign Minister, Ivica Dačić, told the Russian press in 2018: "Yes, today we find ourselves on the European path, but the European path will not be an obstacle for kind relations with Russia, so Serbia will not introduce sanctions against Russia."<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> 'Serbia adopts new IPAP with NATO', *European Western Balkans*, 8 November 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/08/serbia-adopts-new-ipap-with-nato/>, accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>8</sup> Sasa Dragojlo, 'NATO Visit Highlights Serbia's Strategic Balancing Act', *Balkan Insight*, 18 November 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/11/18/nato-visit-highlights-serbia-s-strategic-balancing-act-11-17-2015/>, accessed 13-06-2020

<sup>9</sup> 'Slavic Brotherhood 2019 military exercise begins in Serbia', *TASS*, 15 June 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1063934>, accessed 23-06-2020

<sup>10</sup> 'Serbia has no plans to introduce anti-Russian sanctions, says foreign minister', *TASS*, 26 November 2018, <https://tass.com/world/1032717>, accessed 05-03-2021

December 2020, unlike the EU members, Serbia voted against the UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to end its seizure of Crimea.<sup>11</sup>

Serbia may not necessarily be a unique case given that it is certainly not the first time that a smaller country tries to balance between two or more great powers. However, Serbia is still a puzzling case. Historically, it has been frequently perceived by the Western powers as a Russian ally or a proxy, leading to disputes and even conflicts. Therefore, it is a risky and potentially dangerous policy for Serbia to be close to Russia to the extent that it would encourage the perception in the West of Serbs being “the little Russians”, Russian allies and proxies in the Balkans.<sup>12</sup>

Serbian foreign policy also sets it apart from other countries in the region. Most of the other Balkan nations are mainly taking a pro-Western course. One can test this assertion based on the level of Serbian alignment with the EU’s foreign policy, including joining the EU’s declarations and measures. Among the candidate countries, the Serbian percentage of alignment with the EU’s policies in 2020 (56 per cent) was lowest after Turkey (12 per cent).<sup>13</sup> This puts the fellow candidate countries in the Western Balkans in front of Serbia: Bosnia and Herzegovina had 68 per cent of alignment in 2020; North Macedonia had 93 per cent of alignment; and Montenegro and Albania were fully aligned with the EU’s measures and declarations.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in its neighbourhood, Serbia sticks out.

Ultimately, Serbia would not be expected to conduct such a foreign policy given its evident status as a small country unable to have structural autonomy in the light of its material capability deficiency. According to structural realist logic, Serbia, a small country encircled by NATO and the EU and economically dependent on the West, would

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<sup>11</sup> ‘RFE: Serbia votes against UN resolution on Crimea’, *NI*, 8 December 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a681312-rfe-serbia-votes-against-un-resolution-on-crimea/>, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>12</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Serbs Are Not “Little Russians”’, *The American Interest*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/07/26/serbs-are-not-little-russians/>, accessed 08-09-2018

<sup>13</sup> ‘An analysis of Serbia’s alignment with the European Union’s foreign policy declarations and measures in 2020’, *The International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC)*, March 2021, p.6, <https://www.isac-fund.org/en/publication/an-analysis-of-serbias-alignment-with-the-european-unions-foreign-policy-declarations-and-measures-in-2020>, accessed 21-05-2021

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6

be advised to bandwagon with the West. As Kenneth Waltz said: “As soon as someone looks like the winner, nearly all jump on the bandwagon rather than continuing to build coalitions intended to prevent anyone from winning the prize of power. Bandwagoning, not balancing, becomes the characteristic behaviour.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, Serbia is showing a tendency to balance among great powers, in this case, the West and Russia, without fully aligning with either side. Jelica Kurjak, the Serbian specialist on Russia and former Serbian ambassador in Russia, was also perplexed with the Serbian balancing act: “I have to admit it was always without foundation for me. What weight do we have in international relations?”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Serbia represents an anomaly compared to the dictates of structural realism.

In that regard, the project at hand deals with two types of research puzzle, the first is the one “for which no answer is readily at hand”, and the second for which “the answers suggested by the previous study do not seem to apply.”<sup>17</sup> On the former, no one has engaged systemically with the considerations guiding the Serbian balancing act. With the latter, it is worth adding that except for a couple of Balkan specialists, Serbia and the Balkans have not been a focus of International Relations studies. There are some exceptions, but these works of scholarship did not entirely deal with the Serbian balancing act.

One example of that type of scholarship is the 2012 book by James Ker-Lindsay, “The Foreign Policy of Counter Secession: Preventing the Recognition of Contested States.”<sup>18</sup> In this book, Ker-Lindsay deals with cases of states engaged in counter-secession vis-à-vis contested territories and policy instruments that states use on that front. Serbian policy on Kosovo, including reliance on Russia, was among the cases that Ker-Lindsay examined, but the Serbian balancing act is not the primary focus of this book. A 2017 book by Dimitar Bechev, “Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe”, analyses Russian foreign policy towards Southeastern Europe in the post-Cold War era and the logic

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<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: 1979), p.126

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview with Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>17</sup> Jillian Schwedler, ‘Puzzle’, *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*, Vol. 11, No.2, Fall 2013, p.28

<sup>18</sup> James Ker-Lindsay, *The Foreign Policy of Counter Secession: Preventing the Recognition of Contested States*, (Oxford: 2012)

guiding local nations to engage with Russia.<sup>19</sup> However, the Serbian case is just one of several countries that Bechev examines in a politically diverse region. Therefore, while Bechev's book is a capital work on the topic, it does not venture enough into the Serbian perspective during the period examined in this study. Also, worth mentioning is the book chapter on Serbian foreign policy written in 2014 by Mladen Mladenov, as part of the broader study on the foreign policies of post-Yugoslav states.<sup>20</sup> While Mladenov does refer to the Serbian balancing act as one aspect of Serbian foreign policy, his chapter does not offer a detailed, empirical analysis of that particular aspect of Serbian policy, as his study is a macro bird's-eye view of Serbian foreign policy since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It is also not a theoretically-founded analysis, which creates an opening for a conceptually sound, scholarly analysis of the subject.

Given the research puzzle described above regarding the peculiar case of the Serbian balancing act, a research question was needed based on that puzzle. The logical choice for a research question would be: Why is Serbia conducting its balancing act? However, it is an incomplete approach as Serbian behaviour during the twelve years of the selected case study timeframe differed based on the historical stage in question. It was necessary to explain not just the causes behind the Serbian balancing act but also what causes the difference in manifestation and intensity of that balancing act during different empirical stages. Following that necessity, the research question was formulated as: *Why is Serbia conducting its balancing act, which involves maintaining close ties with Russia, the pursuit of EU membership and a working relationship with the US? Also, what factors explain variation in that balancing during different periods?*

The researcher tested the following hypothesis: The Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2020 was a product of systemic pressures (the independent or the exogenous variable) to which Serbia was exposed, and so was the difference in the manifestation and intensity of that balancing act during various empirical phases. Given that the research project is based on four arguments: a) The independence of Kosovo and the international dispute it

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<sup>19</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven and London: 2017)

<sup>20</sup> Mladen Mladenov, 'An Orpheus Syndrome? Serbian Foreign Policy After the Dissolution of Yugoslavia', in Soeren Keil, and Bernhard Stahl (eds), *The Foreign Policy of Post-Yugoslav States: From Yugoslavia to Europe* (New York: 2014), pp.147-172



triggered is the first systemic pressure causing the Serbian balancing act, as the unresolved Kosovo dispute put Serbia in a state of systemic dependency on Russia and its diplomatic protection; b) The second systemic pressure is the regional power vacuum in the Balkans caused by the deadlock in EU enlargement and lack of US attention, creating a permissive environment for Russia to act more assertively in the region, and an incentive for Serbia to balance and play Russia and the West against each other; c) The difference in the intensity of the Serbian balancing act is determined by the state of relations between Russia and the West, as any major strategic frictions between these two force Serbia to hedge its bets and balance more openly and intensely; d) Party politics acts as the intervening variable through which systemic pressures are translated as Serbian political parties and their leaders use foreign policy in their mutual domestic competition to win power.

The puzzle, research questions, and hypothesis as integral parts of any scientific inquiry have been laid out. What also needs to be laid out is what exactly the thesis tells us about Serbia's foreign policy, and what contribution it makes to our understanding of Serbian foreign policy in terms of IR. This thesis lies at the peculiar intersection of Balkan politics, diplomatic history, general IR and foreign policy analysis (FPA). Consequently, it offers both academic and policy insights. The thesis will describe, analyse and explain Serbian foreign policy behaviour during twelve years of its recent political history regarding balancing Russia and the West. It outlines the changes in Serbia's external environment that cause this balancing. It was possible to determine the key events since 2008 that resulted in Serbia recalibrating its foreign policy. Kosovo's independence, the global financial crisis and the Ukraine crisis are the turning points in Serbia's recent diplomatic history.

Understanding the impact of these episodes is important from an empirical and policy standpoint. It allows us to gain insight into major international changes that shape Serbia's behaviour, particularly as the effects of those changes remain in play today. These changes are all products of a global dynamic that impacts the Serbian regional environment. Even the independence of Kosovo, and the ensuing international dispute in to which Serbia was sucked, should be viewed in that context, as it was the product of

great power dynamics (in the same way Russian decision to back Serbia should be viewed in the context of great power equilibrium).

The thesis empirically identified the Kosovo dispute and the regional power vacuum in the Balkans as key systemic occurrences shaping Serbia's behaviour. Serbian response to these occurrences manifests itself as the balancing act. One can say that this balancing act is a way of hedging for Serbia through diversification of partnerships and compensating for the lack of fully functional relationship with powers the EU and the US. The endgame for Serbia is to secure autonomy and increase its bargaining power with the West, ensuring a more favourable settlement to the Kosovo dispute, which is Serbia's dominant foreign policy challenge, and Serbia's place in the 'Euro-Atlantic' architecture.

Applying the NCR as a theoretical framework allows the shaping of ample empirical data into a logically coherent whole. That way, it is possible to draw conclusions on the patterns behind Serbian foreign policy, particularly its tendency to balance between great powers, in this case, Russia and the West. The conclusion is that as long as the Kosovo dispute remains unresolved, and as long as the EU integration process is frozen, Serbia will keep the Russian option open and hence the balancing act.<sup>21</sup>

The research also establishes that the state of relations between Russia and the West is the third factor in the Serbian systemic environment shaping Belgrade's balancing act. If the international system puts the West and Russia on the trajectory of rivalry, Serbia responds to this systemic process by balancing more openly and more intensely to minimise risk and profit from playing off the 'Great Powers' against each other. If the point of any science is to identify patterns, this study has been able to identify the external realities to which Serbia responds. This study, as a result, put Serbian foreign policy in a wider, global context. The Balkans have been outside the scope of geopolitical breaking news. We can learn how small countries in these forgotten regions are impacted by global great power dynamics through this study. Furthermore, we learn how the countries like Serbia respond to this dynamic.

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<sup>21</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 28 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80188>, accessed 17-11-2019

This study also provides novel insight into Serbian foreign policy because it delves into Serbian domestic politics. One can say that the two shortcomings of both the scholarly and policy deliberations on the international politics of the Balkans are: the neglect of domestic politics in foreign policy formulation in countries like Serbia; and that states in the region are treated as mere objects of great power politics, lacking any agency. This thesis, using the NCR's claims on causal mechanisms, helps overcome these two shortcomings. In the first instance, NCR's introduction of a domestic intervening variable helps the researcher unpack the domestic forces contributing to a certain foreign policy, in this case, a purposeful balancing act. In the second, by identifying the systemic factors causing the Serbian balancing act and analysing Serbian response to these factors, one can explain that while states like Serbia have limited capabilities, they still attempt to promote their interests, although engulfed with great power dynamics in its systemic environment.

This approach accounts for an important contribution because theoretically, we have to unpack the black box of a sovereign state to uncover the domestic drivers of its foreign policy. By introducing the unit-level variable, one gets a more comprehensive overview of the forces behind Serbian behaviour. Indeed, as the NCR logic implies, the domestic factors filter systemic influences. Serbia is no exception on that front. As this project underscored, there is a strong nexus in Serbia between domestic and systemic, resulting in certain policies.

It was established that Serbian party politics is the key domestic factor at play, providing this study with an additional edge. The research uncovered three ways in which party politics impacts foreign policy behaviour. First, Serbian leaders and their parties, following the logic of domestic political survival, avoid unpopular policies, like recognising Kosovo or alienating Russia. Second, in light of a divided constituency, Serbian political leaders and parties push for the balancing act to win the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbs. Third, Serbian political parties, use foreign policy to gain an advantage over their political competitors. Political elites do this either by promoting themselves to the domestic audience as internationally respected leaders or securing the support of relevant great powers depending on the circumstances.

These findings are of central importance to scholars and policy analysts who might inquire about Serbian foreign policy. Domestic vulnerability and opportunistic desire to catch both pro-Western and pro-Russian votes help explain why Serbian policy-makers are so stubbornly persistent in pursuing certain policies, including the policy of balancing. The third point about Serbian political parties using great powers to get ahead of their political competitors is equally relevant in enriching the knowledge of Serbian domestic politics and the country's foreign policy. An important piece is added to the puzzle as it explains how the domestic environment shapes foreign policy and discounts the conventional wisdom that the Balkan countries are simply targets of influence by great powers. Instead, individual countries try to manipulate these great powers for their benefit. In this case, using foreign policy in the kingmaker game contributes to this type of behaviour.

By using the NCR as a conceptual framework, one can give a nuanced multi-layer analysis of all the systemic and domestic factors that condition Belgrade's behaviour with suitable explanatory sub-plots. The analysis based on NCR is capable of producing a scholarly work that is policy-relevant. Except for Balkan scholars, countries like Serbia have been neglected. This study helps remedy that by providing new input for those interested in Serbia and the Balkans but does so by placing it within broader dilemmas of IR discipline.

## **1.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework – Neoclassical Realism (NCR)**

This research project employs NCR as a suitable analytical framework to analyse the Serbian balancing act. This proposal is made because NCR offers a strong causal mechanism to determine the causation behind the Serbian balancing act, and also provides the opportunity to unify the empirical findings uncovered in the research into a single, logically coherent whole. The term NCR first came into circulation in 1998, when Gideon Rose used it in his article for the *World Politics* journal, in which he reviewed works of the new generation of realist scholars.

What is the crucial argument of NCR? Its proponents follow the vital claim of the realist tradition that a country's foreign policy is a response to international systemic pressures, but NCR scholars also argue that those pressures are translated through unit-level, intervening variables.<sup>22</sup> As the youngest of the three versions of the realist tradition, NCR tries to reconcile its older predecessors, classical realism and neorealism. From classical realism, NCR takes the concern for state-society relations while keeping the methodological and scientific rigour of neorealism with its *a priori* claim that the international system shapes states' behaviour.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, NCR claims that all states are subject to the influence of the international system. However, the way states respond to these systemic influences depends on unit-level factors, like leadership perceptions (individual level of analysis) and domestic politics (state level of analysis). Therefore, in its essence, the NCR is not a theory of IR but a theory of foreign policy. In that context, William Wohlforth, one of NCR's pioneers, went as far as to call it a "realist theory for foreign policy analyst."<sup>24</sup> NCR was selected as the analytical framework for the present study because there was a need for "a two-level"<sup>25</sup> analysis that takes into account both systemic and domestic factors. Indeed, as Kenneth Waltz pointed out, there are permissive causes (systemic environment) that make something possible, and efficient causes (unit-level factors) that make something happen at a specific moment.<sup>26</sup>

As the Serbian case differed from most of the other countries in the region, it was evident that inspecting domestic factors was necessary to determine with certainty the causes of the Serbian balancing act. Consequently, this research did not entangle itself with "the actor-general foreign policy analysis (FPA)" that tends to put foreign policy behaviour under broad, general patterns, but it applies "actor-specific FPA" that considers the

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<sup>22</sup> Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No.1, October 1998, p.146

<sup>23</sup> 'Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy', in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: 2009), p.19

<sup>24</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and foreign policy', in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (eds), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: 2012), p.52

<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games', *International Organization*, Vol.42, No.3, Summer 1988, pp. 427-460

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: 1959), pp.232-234

individual uniqueness of a particular state.<sup>27</sup> NCR was applied as a theory “that incorporates both external and internal variables” in its analysis.<sup>28</sup> The theory that incorporates systemic-level and unit-level variables was an absolute must for this study. The research was able to identify systemic pressures that propelled the Serbian balancing act. These research findings, as a result, fit into the realist worldview. However, identifying systemic pressures affecting Serbia do not explain why Serbia responded to these pressures the way it did by adopting the balancing act as a policy. The application of NCR enabled both identifying systemic pressures conditioning the Serbian balancing act as well as the domestic factors that impacted Serbian response to these systemic pressures.

The argument of this study is grounded in NCR’s causal mechanism. The systemic pressures are the key causal force behind the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2020. These systemic pressures constitute an independent variable in the neoclassical realist worldview. Kosovo’s independence and the international dispute caused by it acts as the first intervening variable as Serbia became systemically dependent on Russia as it needed a diplomatic protector on Kosovo. The regional power vacuum in the Balkans also acts as an intervening variable, as the strategic inaction by the EU and the US left an opening for Russia to act more assertively there. This vacuum also generated a systemic temptation for Serbia to accept Russia’s overtures and use it to increase its bargaining powers with the West. There is a third systemic pressure that the research integrates as the independent variable, which is the state of relations between Russia and the West. This systemic pressure determines the variation in the Serbian balancing act in terms of its form and intensity. If the relations between Russia and the West are not adversarial, Serbia balances between the two with relative diplomatic and strategic tranquillity. However, if this relationship becomes adversarial, then Serbia balances more openly and more intensely to avoid choosing sides and potentially benefit by balancing and manipulating Russia and the West against each other. These systemic pressures act as intervening variables that operate at the systemic level and generate the Serbian balancing act, which stands out as an outcome or the dependent variable in NCR’s methodology.

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<sup>27</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, ‘Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol.1, No.1, 2005, pp. 1-30, (p.2)

<sup>28</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, p.146

The application of NCR would not be complete without an intervening variable. In NCR's paradigm, the intervening variable operates at the unit-level of analysis, impacting how systemic pressures are translated into foreign policy outcomes. The unit-level, intervening variables distort and filter these systemic pressures. Consequently, there is only infrequently a perfect process of international systemic pressures being automatically converted into an expected state behaviour. The research I conducted established that in the Serbian balancing act, Serbian party politics acts as the intervening variable. In Serbia, political parties and their leaders are opportunistic actors that dominate the political environment, capitalising on weak institutions and the non-existence of rule-of-law. In their domestic struggle for power, the political parties also use foreign policy to triumph over their competitors. As it has been stated already, in doing so, Serbian political parties: a) avoid pursuing unpopular policies; b) try to catch the votes of both pro-Russian and pro-Western constituents; c) try to acquire the support of great powers to achieve an advantage in the struggle to win power. Given this reality of the Serbian political system and the political parties' opportunistic character, Serbian party politics distort and filter the systemic pressures impacting Serbia. The result of distorting and filtering systemic factors is the outcome, the Serbian balancing act.

### **1.3 Research Methodology**

The central methodological issue of this study will concern causality or determining the causes of a certain effect. In methodology, there are two ways of addressing the issue of causality, one of quantitative methods where the approach "effects of causes" dominates, and one of qualitative methods where the "causes of effects" approach prevails. The former measures the average effect of the causal, independent variable, while the latter is associated with qualitative research where causes of particular effect within an individual case are being examined.<sup>29</sup> This study will accept the qualitative "causes of effects" approach. In that regard, it will try to establish a clear relationship between the causal factor or, as it is called, the independent variable, and outcome, or dependent variable.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Social Science* (Princeton and Oxford: 2012), pp.41-42

<sup>30</sup> John Gering, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: 2012), p.199

This research project used three methods: case study, process tracing and analytical narrative.

The use of the case study method draws an ontological question, “a case of what.”<sup>31</sup> On that front, it is always important to note that a case study stands for “a single case of a particular phenomenon.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, this project will address the case of an individual state’s foreign policy, in this instance the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West between 2008 and 2020. As previously described, this case deviates from the type of policy one would expect empirically and theoretically, and so constitutes a puzzle. Furthermore, some of the chapters will also deal with specific Serbian governments’ cases and their foreign policy in a specific time frame. Putting these cases in chronological order can help the historically informed process tracing methods that should help determine causes of the outcome and understand the evolutionary process.

This step will be made in chapters 5, 6 and 7, which are empirical case study chapters. The empirical chapters will test NCR’s causal mechanism on which this project is based, and one can determine in that way the causal forces behind Serbian balancing. This logic is particularly relevant in chapter 5, which analyses the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2012, analysing how this policy came into being in the first place. The application of empirical, case study methods is also relevant for the second part of the project’s research question, which is “what factors explain variation in that balancing during different periods?” As the case studies are applied to policies conducted during different historical periods, this research project also has a small element of a comparative approach. A conclusion about variations in the Serbian balancing act can be drawn from comparing different periods. By comparing the individual cases, it is possible to determine why, between 2012 and 2014 (chapter 6), the Serbian balancing act was done without causing any strategic frictions, and why between 2014 and 2020 (chapter 7), its balancing act became more pronounced, and brazen.

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<sup>31</sup> Audie Klotz, ‘Case Selection’, in Audie Klotz, and Deepa Prakash (eds), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide* (Hampshire, NY: 2008), p. 44

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Schrank, ‘Case-Based Research’, in Ellen Perecman, and Sarra R. Curan (eds), *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research: Essays & Bibliographic Sources on Research Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2006), p.21



The second research method is process tracing, which frequently goes hand-in-hand with the case study method. The procedures of process tracing are used to “make causal inferences about a single case.”<sup>33</sup> The process tracing methodology is intended “to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes. ... by focusing on “sequential processes”<sup>34</sup> and as such it “identifies a causal chain that links independent and dependent variables.”<sup>35</sup> The sequential analysis is linked with process tracing as a sequence of events is tracked, and “critical junctures” are identified.<sup>36</sup> Process tracing allows the simultaneous use of inductive reasoning based on empirical factors and deductive reasoning that allows the formulation of research questions and theoretical foundations.<sup>37</sup> In that regard, the research will first try to establish an empirical/chronological overview of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West from 2008 to 2020, before using theoretical and conceptual tools to explain Serbian foreign policy’s determinants.

In order to conduct the empirical process tracing, both primary and secondary sources were used. The main limitation of primary sources is that Serbian archives remain inaccessible. The primary research focused on newspapers and other media materials. Policy analysis produced by various think tanks were also consulted as part of the process tracing. In terms of secondary sources, a multiplicity of publications dealing with Serbian foreign policy are already existent in Serbia; however, they all have significant shortcomings. They are often ideologically burdened, oriented on a traditional empirical overview of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, and without any theoretical background, which is a gap that this research tried to fill.

Interview as an instrument of qualitative research was essential for this project, particularly considering the lack of primary archival sources available for empirical process tracing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 stakeholders in

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<sup>33</sup> James Mahoney, ‘Process Tracing and Historical Explanation’, *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, 2015, p. 200

<sup>34</sup> Rajneesh Verma, *The Tiger and the Dragon: A Neoclassical Realist perspective of India and China in the oil industry in West Africa*, PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, April 2013, p.20

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘Process Tracing’, in Klotz, and Prakash (eds), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, p. 114

<sup>36</sup> James Mahoney, ‘Process Tracing and Historical Explanation’, pp. 204-205

<sup>37</sup> Rajneesh Verma, *The Tiger and the Dragon*, p.20

Serbia during a 2019 fieldwork trip to Belgrade. It included representatives of political parties, retired and current Serbian diplomats, parliament members, former and current government advisers, academics, journalists, and representatives of think tanks. The main ethical and practical risk in this task was the sensitivity of the subject and potential implications for interviewees' position and reputation. This risk was particularly pronounced in regards to the sources who are still government employees. Therefore, all interviews were conducted after written consent was given and under the option of complete anonymity, which some sources took. As empirical research was able to sketch out the causal mechanism, an inductive discovery was possible, meaning that it was established that the uncovered causal mechanism fits the existent theory.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the NCR, as a theoretical framework, could be formalised.

Finally, analytical narrative, as an "organisation of material in a chronologically sequential order, and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots",<sup>39</sup> was used in the final stage of the proposed project when the findings gathered had to be compiled in a coherent, written form. Thus, the project's result is a thorough analytic narrative explanation of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West from 2008 to 2020, including explaining its causation. The systemic and domestic factors that respectively act as independent and intervening variables were used as sub-plots analysing Serbian policy towards the EU, the US and Russia during selected empirical phases. On that front, this dissertation can be defined as "a historical explanatory dissertation" that uses an established theory to explain the causes of a historical event and that gives "a good deal of description but focus on explaining what is described."<sup>40</sup>

## **1.4 Outline of Chapters**

Chapter 2 deals with NCR as the theoretical framework of this study. The chapter first examines the basic insights offered by two theoretical predecessors of NCR, classical and neorealism. The chapter continues by outlining NCR and how it overcame the

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<sup>38</sup> James Mahoney, 'Process Tracing and Historical Explanation', p. 215

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.20

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY and London: 1997), pp.91-92

shortcomings of the previous versions of the realist school. The two general themes of NCR that apply to this study are also presented. The first theme is that different states respond differently to international systemic pressures. The second is that the salience of domestic politics as an intervening variable.

Chapter 3 engages with the independent variable, the international systemic pressures impacting the Serbian balancing act. This chapter first ventures into the debate about the nature of the post-Cold War system impacting Serbia. The system is defined as a hybrid, uni-multipolar system. This systemic setting explains how Serbia interacts with three relevant global powers: Russia and those two powers constituting the West, the US and the EU. The specific systemic pressures causing the Serbian balancing act are explained. Kosovo's independence and international dispute with substantial great power influx is the first systemic pressure. The regional power vacuum caused by Western inaction in the region is also identified as systemic processes impacting Belgrade's balancing act. Ultimately, the chapter also identifies the third systemic pressure: the state of relations between Russia and the West that shapes the intensity of the Serbian balancing act.

Chapter 4 addresses domestic factors that act as the intervening variable, which this chapter identifies as Serbian party politics. The concept of the intervening variable was discussed and the role that party politics played in existing NCR scholarship. On that front, this study differs from NCR as it considers the correlation between internal domestic party competition and foreign policy. The competition between Serbian political parties has a distorting effect on systemic forces affecting Serbia, and that is why it is an intervening variable. Before party politics is described in more detail, the alternative candidates for the intervening variable, namely perceptions and public opinion, are discounted as inadequate to play that role within the studied case. Ultimately, the chapter shows the Serbian political environment in which party politics and their leaders dominate public policy in the absence of functional democratic institutions. These party politics and party divisions became more toxic after Kosovo's independence in 2008, establishing a new interplay pattern between Serbia's foreign policy and its internal party politics. From that point onwards, Serbian political parties leverage foreign policy in three ways for the domestic purpose of winning power: a) avoiding domestically unpopular policies; b)

trying to win votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian constituents, and c) trying to gain the support of great powers to get ahead of their competitors.

Chapter 5 is the first chapter examining the independent and intervening variable in the empirical case study. This chapter analyses the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2012, showing how Serbia's relations with the EU, the US and Russia were shaped by the systemic pressures and domestic party politics that respectively acted as independent and intervening variables. It argues that Kosovo's independence and the regional power vacuum propelled Serbia to embrace the balancing act in its foreign policy. The emergence of Russia is also explained in the context of Moscow trying to push back against the West. The chapter also filters Serbian policies towards three relevant great powers through the analytical filter of Serbian party politics, showing the political rift that emerged in Serbia after Kosovo's independence in 2008. From that point on Kosovo dispute and relations with the EU, Russia and the US became instruments in domestic competition for power among Serbian political parties and elites.

Chapter 6 engages with the Serbian balancing act between 2012 and 2014. Analytically, this chapter uses the same steps as the previous one of filtering Serbian policies towards the EU, the US and Russia through the analytical lenses of the intervening and independent variables. This chapter's comparative element is essential, and relevant for the second part of the research question on the causes behind intensity variations of Serbian balancing. While the Kosovo dispute and power vacuum remained in play, the Serbian balancing act could continue as there was no major rivalry between Russia and the West at the time. Domestically, party politics remained the intervening variable. The chapter shows how former nationalists used foreign policy to win power by embracing European integrations and using their domestic resilience to the internal nationalist backlash to open normalisation talks with Kosovo under EU mediation.

Chapter 7 is the ultimate empirical chapter, showing how independent and intervening variables operated during the final stage of the Serbian balancing act between 2014 and 2020 when the Serbian policy of balancing was at its height. The chapter shows that during this period the regional power vacuum intensified further as the EU paused its

enlargement given the geopolitical pressures impacting it, like the migrant crisis and Brexit. As a result, the Kosovo dispute intensified during the EU's declining role as a mediator, energising the Russian factor again. This chapter argues that what really intensified the Serbian balancing act was the brewing rivalry between Russia and the West after the Ukraine Crisis. The Ukraine Crisis motivated Russia to view Serbia and the Balkans as theatres for pushback against the West. In that systemic environment, Serbia saw balancing as a way to minimise risk and extract benefits from both sides by playing them against each other. The chapter shows that, later on, the US played a part in suppressing some of the Russian influence, demonstrating that the US can be a gamechanger. Domestically, party politics continued to play the role of intervening variable, although in a context in which Serbia experienced a democratic backsliding transforming into an illiberal regime. In that context, the ruling elite still leverages great powers to acquire domestic legitimacy and stay in power. The chapter outlines that party politics in Serbia will continue to be the intervening variable that impacts systemic pressures impacting ties with Russia. The chapter concludes that this reality will not change soon given the domestic salience of the Kosovo dispute in Serbia and Russia's potent popularity in the country.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion, where the summation of the argument is provided. The methodology is revisited, showing the reader once again the steps undertaken to reach the conclusions contained in the conceptual and empirical case study chapters. The NCR as a theoretical framework is also laid out together with the methodology. Afterwards, the concluding chapter also reflects briefly upon the main research findings, and it will present a contribution the thesis made to the NCR literature, Balkan scholarship and general IR discipline. The concluding chapter will also provide recommendations for further research, as the case of Serbia can be attractive for empirical researchers, fellow NCR authors, and IR researchers from other theoretical schools.

## **CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - NEOCLASSICAL REALISM (NCR)**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism (NCR). While there is a whole set of other theoretical traditions through which the selected case study can be analysed, ranging from Innenpolitik theories focused on domestic politics, to liberalism and social constructivism, the empirical data collected through research can best be put together into a logical whole through the application of NCR. This chapter will explain NCR within the broader family of realist theories, as the latest version of a larger realist tradition stemming from classical realism and neorealism. While also showing the shortcomings of these two versions of realism, the chapter proposes NCR as the latest version of realist theory that tries to fill the gaps left by classical realism and neorealism.

This chapter will also highlight two general themes of NCR, which apply to the selected case. The first theme is that not all states respond in the same way to the international system. The second theme concerns the use of domestic politics in NCR's causal logic. Consequently, NCR with these two themes and its causal mechanism asserts itself as the conceptual and theoretical framework of analysis. Like any other state, Serbia responds to external, systemic pressures, but it responds in its own unique way, and the form of this response is dependent on its domestic politics.

### **2.2 Classical Realism and Neorealism – NCR's Predecessors**

Realism is quite a divergent theory. However, one can identify elements that are common to all versions of realism. These elements are usually defined as the “three Ss”, consisting of statism (the state as the primary actor in the international system), survival (as the primary goal of every state), and self-help (a state can only rely upon itself in an anarchic

system).<sup>41</sup> Robert Gilpin followed a similar logic, stressing that every realism has three basic assumptions: “the essentially conflictual nature of international affairs”, “the essence of social reality is the group”, and finally “the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation.”<sup>42</sup>

Many associate the word realism with an entire grouping of classical political thinkers, including the likes of Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes. However, realism as a scholarly approach to IR is associated with two authors and their seminal works that are considered the archetypes of classical realism. They are E.H. Carr’s “The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Politics” (1939) and Hans Morgenthau’s “Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace” (1948).

While Carr’s work had a monumental impact on IR’s inception as a discipline, it did not offer a theoretically rigorous overview of IR and foreign policy. Carr’s entire logic was reduced to the intellectual critique of the liberal worldview, or as he labelled it utopianism, and the notion of the natural harmony of interests among states.<sup>43</sup> John Mearsheimer points out similarly that Carr did not provide a theory of international politics but a rebuff of what he saw as the delusional neglect of centrality of power in international relations by liberals and idealists in the English-speaking world.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike Carr, Morgenthau has gone much further in asserting realism as a theory. Morgenthau’s theory traces causality at the individual level of analysis in human nature. Morgenthau claimed that: “Social forces are the product of human nature in action” and that any politics including international politics is a power struggle.<sup>45</sup> Therefore the only

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<sup>41</sup> Tim Dunne, Brian C. Schmidt, ‘Realism’, in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics, An Introduction to International Relations*, 7th Edition (Oxford: 2017), pp.109-111

<sup>42</sup> Robert Gilpin, ‘The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism’, *International Organization*, Vol.38, No.2, Spring 1984, p.290

<sup>43</sup> Chris Brown with Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke and New York: 2005), p. 26

<sup>44</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, ‘E. H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On’, *International Relations*, Vol. 19., No. 2, 2005, pp. 140-141

<sup>45</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: 1948), pp. 4, 13

way to act in a world dominated by unpredictable human nature is to pursue national interest defined in the context of power.<sup>46</sup>

However, while Morgenthau and classical realists tried to “translate the maxims of nineteenth century’s European diplomatic practice into more general laws of an American social science”<sup>47</sup>, they failed to provide a theory that can be generalisable, as the notion of the state pursuing its national interest was too broad and too vague. Therefore, classical realism never intended to develop IR as a social science or provide its realist worldview with a scientific character.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, while classical realism tends to appreciate nuances its overly descriptive and less rigorous approach disqualifies it as a potential framework of analysis for this study.

Kenneth Waltz and his capital study “Theory of International Politics” (1979) tried to provide realism with what Carr and Morgenthau failed to do: scientific character, parsimony and a more generalisable character. Waltz did this by tracing causality at the international systemic level and its structure, thus paving the way for his version of realism, known as structural realism or neorealism. Waltz stressed that the structure of the international system with its two structural elements of anarchy and distribution of power capabilities seriously constrains the range of foreign policy options that individual states have at their disposal within that same system. Therefore, regardless of political units’ internal character, the anarchic system based on self-help compels states to behave in a specific fashion, pursuing security and maintaining the balance of power.<sup>49</sup> However, in its attempt to provide a general overview, Waltz’s theory did not offer instruments to analyse specific policies.

Waltz’s theory faced numerous critiques in the post-Cold War period. While Waltz’s neorealism rightly stressed that the Cold War was brought about by the Soviet decline in relative power capabilities, the neorealist emphasis on the international system failed to

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<sup>46</sup> Tim Dunne, Brian C. Schmidt, ‘Realism’, p.107

<sup>47</sup> Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of the Death Foretold* (London and New York, 1998), p.1

<sup>48</sup> Kevin Narizny, ‘On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay’, *International Security*, Vol. 42, No.2, Fall 2017, p.157

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp.79-128



provide the complete overview by neglecting unit-level factors. In that context, neorealism was unable to explain the role that Reagan's and Gorbachev's policies or the crisis of the Soviet system had in ending the Cold War. Furthermore, many of the neorealist predictions based on the systemic logic have also failed, like why there has been no effective great power coalition to balance the US after the end of the Cold War.<sup>50</sup> These examples showed both the limitations of the systemic approach and the need to introduce unit-level factors to explain the deviations from systemic theories' propositions.

Neorealism can analyse Serbia's balancing act, but it also has its major limitations. The neorealist assumption is that smaller states, like Serbia, lack material capabilities and have very few foreign policy options except to bandwagon with a great power. Although neorealism, with its presumption that the international system determines state behaviour, is an effective way of analysing international outcomes, it is not suitable for explaining an individual state's conduct. Neorealism has been inefficient because it has left unit level determinants outside of its analytical scope. As the most famous name associated with neorealism, the late Kenneth Waltz himself acknowledged in the article with the same name that "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy."<sup>51</sup>

This acknowledges that there is a clear-cut distinction between the two. Namely, the systemic theory of international politics addresses the issue of interaction between political units operating at the systemic level, with systemic forces compelling different units to behave similarly; while the theory of foreign policy examines policies conducted at the national level, particularly in the context of individual states behaving differently when faced with the same systemic pressures.<sup>52</sup> Neorealism tries to make predictions on all states' behaviour on the average within the international system, by implying that systemic incentives compel states to either bandwagon or balance.<sup>53</sup> In that context, neorealism provides little insight into foreign policy behaviour that does not fall into the dichotomy of bandwagoning and balancing. Therefore, neorealism cannot explain the

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<sup>50</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No.1, 1999, pp. 5-41

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy', *Security Studies*, Vol.6, Issue 1, Autumn 1996, pp.54-57

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp.71-72

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.125-128

case that is the subject of this study as Serbian actions can hardly be qualified under the mentioned dichotomy.

That is to say, Serbia is not pursuing a full-fledged bandwagoning as it is not attempting full integration with the West as are almost all of the countries in the Balkan region. Serbian aspiration to join the EU might be interpreted as a form of bandwagoning, but Belgrade is not going all the way with bandwagoning as it is not interested in joining NATO. On the other hand, Serbia is not pursuing balancing behaviour either. The word balancing in systemic realism is associated with the notion of balance of power. Balancing is taken against a particular state either through internal balancing, where the state that balances is strengthening its power capabilities, or through external balancing where state forms an alliance. This type of behaviour is also not applicable to the Serbian case because if Serbia were pursuing a balancing action, it would create an alliance with Russia against the West.

Instead, Serbia is conducting a balancing that is not balancing against a particular actor but balancing between several geopolitical actors at once. Namely, with Serbia's current systemic and domestic environment, Serbia cannot make a full-tilt towards either Russia or the West. In both cases, from the Serbian standpoint, that would imply the loss of autonomy. That loss would suggest Serbia sacrificing some of the interest it deems vital. Aligning with the West means the resolution of the Kosovo dispute in the way the West prescribes it. That way is where Serbia accepts the loss of territory and where Serbia is perceived as the sole loser of the Kosovo dispute. An option deemed unacceptable for both the Serbian elite and the public. Aligning with Russia would imply turning its back on the West, an irrational policy course as Serbia's primary partnerships revolve around the West in economic and security terms.

Equally important is that in an environment where the EU membership remains an unrealistic prospect, Serbia has little incentive to give up on cooperating with Russia, although its cooperation with the West is more extensive. Therefore, through diversification of partnerships and hedging, Serbia maintains the balance between Russia and the West and prevents losing autonomy to either side. One can say that Russia is used

as Serbia's leverage and bargaining instrument with the West. Russia is used to score a better bargain with the West, not just on Kosovo but on Serbia's relations with the West. It is about securing beneficial terms under which Serbia becomes part of the Western architecture without paying the price deemed unacceptable by Belgrade, for instance, Kosovo. Consequently, Serbian foreign policy behaviour does not fit into the neorealist predictions on state behaviour. On the contrary, Serbian behaviour is more nuanced and complex and cannot be easily captured and explained by Waltz's theoretically elegant, parsimonious concepts.

With that in mind, it is evident that this study needs to apply a theory dealing with foreign policy behaviour and not a theory of international politics. Suppose one relies on neorealism as the analytical framework. In that case, one can understand the systemic environment and restraints and enablers of a country's foreign policy, but it cannot explain why a country chooses a specific policy. This shortcoming of neorealism is that irrespective of a state's position in the international system inquiry into unit-level factors is necessary to determine the causes of a particular foreign policy behaviour. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be explained by the systemic factors of unipolarity and US military capabilities as enablers of the invasion. However, to explain why the US invaded Iraq, one needs to go beyond systemic factors. Although Serbia is in no way in the same power rank as the US, the same remark on the limitations of systemic theories is applicable in the Serbian balancing act.

Suppose one intuitively applies a systemic approach to Serbia's balancing act. In that case, one can say that since 2008 the Western players, the US and the EU, have been distracted away from the Balkans, enabling Russia to play a more assertive role. This does not imply that Serbian foreign policy is dependent on Russia. It suggests a systemic reality in which Serbia cannot conduct a balancing act if Russia does not have the ambition to play an active Balkan role. In contrast, when it is active, Serbia has a systemically conditioned option of balancing among two or more external powers. Namely, if only the Western powers were engaged in the Balkans the range of Serbian foreign policy options would be restrained, forcing Serbia to coordinate its policies with the Western actors. However, if an external, non-Western power like Russia becomes involved in the region,

Serbia has an incentive to balance Russia and the West. However, while this explains what made that policy possible, it does not explain why Serbia is pursuing such a policy. As the title of one study points out, the systemic approach to foreign policy does not explain: “why state X made a certain move last Tuesday.”<sup>54</sup>

### **2.3 Neoclassical Realism (NCR)**

Ultimately, NCR emerged as a theory that tried to fill the void left by classical realism and neorealism. The term NCR was first coined by Gideon Rose in 1998 when he wrote a review of several works of post-Cold War realist scholarship. Rose famously described what characterises the scholars of NCR: “Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical.”<sup>55</sup>

Given this description, NCR tries to develop “a greater methodological sophistication than their classical realist predecessors”, but it also acts as a theory of foreign policy, unlike neorealism that acts as a theory of IR that explains international outcomes.<sup>56</sup> While neorealism deals with circumstances affecting the states, NCR deals with how individual states respond when faced with these circumstances.<sup>57</sup> In that context, neorealism stands as a normative theory that describes how states should behave under the presumption of certain circumstances, while NCR is somewhat of a descriptive theory describing how states behave, deviating from the ideal outcomes of neorealism given the intersection between the domestic and systemic forces at play.<sup>58</sup> One can also say that NCR is a

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<sup>54</sup> Anders Wivel, ‘Explaining why state X made a certain move last Tuesday: the promise and limitations of realist foreign policy analysis’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol.8, Issue 4, 2005, pp. 355-380

<sup>55</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, p.146

<sup>56</sup> ‘Introduction’, in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, p.19

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘Security Seeking under Anarchy – Defensive Realism Revisited’, *International Security*, Vol.25, No. 3, Winter 2000-2001, p.132

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunities: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (Stanford: 2015), pp. 6-7

reconciliation between two previous strands of realist thinking, classical realism and neorealism, and is doing this by correcting the shortcomings of one tradition with the insights of the other. Simply put, the variance of classical realism is framed more systematically into the parsimony of neorealism, while the structural logic of neorealism is enriched in explanatory power.<sup>59</sup>

By reconciling classical realism with neorealism, NCR has used themes belonging to classical realism like state-society relations and statesmanship. However, NCR is divergent from classical realism in giving causal primacy to systemic variables and insisting on social science methodology.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, NCR does not focus on grand theory, but the contingent, middle-range theory that underscores context, placing itself between IR and diplomatic history, with the former using theoretical explanation and the latter using descriptive narratives of certain events.<sup>61</sup> One can say that by reconciling the neorealist theorising on the international system with a classical realist account of particular foreign policy, NCR has rectified the imbalance that exists between the general and the particular.<sup>62</sup>

NCR was also able to develop a more elaborate causal mechanism for the study of foreign policy by filling the void left by both Innenpolitik theories and neorealism. It did this by noting that the international system determines a state's foreign policy, but also by underlining that "systemic pressures are translated through unit level intervening variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structure. In the neoclassical realist world leaders can be constrained by both international and domestic politics."<sup>63</sup> In that regard, NCR as a theory implies the existence of a "two-level game",<sup>64</sup> or as a prominent NCR theorist Thomas Christensen paraphrased it, a "two-level approach"<sup>65</sup> meaning that both systemic and domestic factors are at play.

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<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Kitchen, 'Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.36, Issue 1, 2010, p.118

<sup>60</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: 2016), p.170

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunities*, p.33

<sup>62</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and foreign policy', p.39

<sup>63</sup> Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', p.152

<sup>64</sup> Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics', pp. 427-460

<sup>65</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: 1996), pp.13-14

The significant contribution of NCR was reconciling the difference between the Innenpolitik approach and systemic theory, achieving the recommendation that Fareed Zakaria provided back in 1992, that “a good account of a nation’s foreign policy should include systemic, domestic, and other influences, specifying what aspects of the policy can be explained by what factors.”<sup>66</sup> Waltz would not disagree with Zakaria’s assertion. After all, in his book “Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience” (1967), Waltz took into account the role of the democratic system of governance in explaining the foreign policy behaviour of the US and the UK.<sup>67</sup> Even Waltz, the father of structural realism, knew that domestic factors need to be considered when analysing foreign policy. NCR took this reality into account.

Using this approach, NCR has also acted in line with the belief that realism should address the interaction between domestic and international politics, instead of engaging in a debate about whether one takes precedence over the other.<sup>68</sup> That way, NCR has renounced Waltz’s proposition that theory “ought not include explanatory variables at different levels of analysis.”<sup>69</sup> NCR has tried to resolve this dispute by avoiding positing a simple multi-level approach, asserting instead that systemic pressures hold primacy in determining foreign policy conduct, but the form of response to those systemic pressures depends on unit level variables.<sup>70</sup>

One other important element makes NCR even more interesting for the study of particular foreign policy cases. By introducing intervening variables at the unit level, NCR integrates FPA’s insights on leadership, perception and domestic structure into a realist paradigm.<sup>71</sup> An important point to make, as for many years FPA has been set apart from IR’s main theories, with FPA frequently claiming that is a corrective to realist insights.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Fareed Zakaria, ‘Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No.1, Summer 1992, p.198

<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (New York: 1967)

<sup>68</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: 1991), p.319

<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘Security Seeking under Anarchy’, p. 134

<sup>70</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.163

<sup>71</sup> Chris Alden, and Amnon Aran, *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London and New York: 2017), p.157

<sup>72</sup> David Patrick Houghton, ‘Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, January 2007, pp.24-25

NCR and FPA share an interest in various unit-level factors like cognition and leadership perception of the international realities, bureaucratic organisations and policymakers' institutional autonomy.<sup>73</sup> However, it might be too early to label NCR as William Wohlforth did as a "realist theory for foreign policy analyst."<sup>74</sup> That is to say, NCR believes in the primacy of international system over unit level factors treating the system as the independent variable, while FPA treats unit level factors as the independent variable, which means that NCR and FPA are "separate but related research agendas."<sup>75</sup>

In general, realism has been said to be a theoretical tradition with the firmest foundation in real-life foreign policy practices that, at the same time, tries to conceive a general theory.<sup>76</sup> The NCR has kept the scientific and theoretical rigour of theorists like Kenneth Waltz, but without discarding practical insight into statecraft and foreign policy found with classical realists like Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Arnold Wolfers.<sup>77</sup> That way, NCR has tried to avoid robust debates that make the discipline of IR produce apolitical pieces of scholarship, losing sight of the fact that IR's main point is to explore policy and politics. This approach is relevant as there is a trend of IR tending to produce a more apolitical scholarship as it becomes "more self-conscious" as a discipline.<sup>78</sup> By keeping in mind all of these observations about NCR as the latest stage in the evolution of a broader realist theoretical tradition, and its attributes and its advantages in analysing foreign policy behaviour, we can address the NCR themes that apply to this particular study.

## 2.4 NCR Themes

If one chooses to apply NCR, one also needs to explain what one means by NCR when using that theory. Over time it has evolved as a theory and caused a discussion of what

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<sup>73</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.172

<sup>74</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and foreign policy', p.52

<sup>75</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp.172-173

<sup>76</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and foreign policy', p.42

<sup>77</sup> 'Introduction', in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, p.4

<sup>78</sup> Randall L. Schweller, 'The Progressive Power of Neoclassical Realism', in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds), *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: 2003), p. 347

the term implies. As one of the recent studies on NCR stresses there are three versions: NCR as the explanation of anomalies of neorealism; as a theory of FP; and most recently as a theory of IR.<sup>79</sup>

The last version is based on the notion that “policies and strategies selected by the major powers of the international system ...can have important effects on international outcomes and systemic structure over time”, meaning that “in the short and medium term”, NCR is an approach to foreign policy; while “in medium to long-term” NCR is an approach to IR.<sup>80</sup> Serbia is not a great power, but a small state with limited power capabilities. Therefore, Serbian actions do not produce systemic effects over structural outcomes. As such, this study requires the use of NCR to explain deviations from neorealism, and as a theory of foreign policy, rather than as a theory of IR. With that in mind, this study will be based on two general themes of NCR: the first is that not all states respond in the same fashion to the international system’s stimuli, and the second is NCR’s insistence on domestic politics.

With the first theme, NCR points to the reality that escaped the neorealists, that there is no simple, direct and straightforward causal relationship between the international system and the foreign policy behaviour of particular states, or that there is “no immediate or perfect transmission belt.”<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey Taliaferro provided a very illustrative example of states responding differently to the challenges of the international system. Namely, in the 19th century China and Japan faced the same systemic challenge, of being targets of Western powers. However, the two countries responded differently. While Japan initiated reforms and modernisation that enabled it to become a great power able to compete with the Western powers, China failed in achieving the same feat, becoming entrapped in what was known as the Century of Humiliation.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp.26-32, 80-98

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.81, 88

<sup>81</sup> Anders Wivel, ‘Explaining why state X made a certain move last Tuesday’, p.357; Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, pp.146-147

<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State’, *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July-September 2006, pp. 464-465



By explaining these deviations from neorealism, NCR pointed out that while all states are under the international system's influence, they have different interests, and the interest formation is conditioned not just by the state's systemic environment but also by its domestic dynamics. Therefore, a state's behaviour depends not just on the international system but also on the state's interests. This proposition has recently attracted criticism from political scientist Kevin Narizny, who emphasised that the priority of security in the realist paradigm and the notion of anarchy as the ordering principle seriously compromises NCR's proclivity to underscore different interests of different states.<sup>83</sup>

Narizny focuses on the notion that realists have different definitions of security that he perceives as impermissible from the realist paradigm's standpoint. However, all realists prioritise security, and their definition of security has a common denominator, which is the value of survival, allowing states to pursue other goals once survival is ensured. As John Mearsheimer frequently notes, survival is the primary goal of every state, because if survival is not assured, states cannot pursue other goals.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, given that realists are mindful of threats to their security/survival from the international system, Narizny discounts NCR's attempt to stress that states have different goals and preferences.

However, as a trio of prominent NCR proponents (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell) observed, the state's survival is not frequently tested by the international system as: "States are rarely faced with such stark choices. In the more common circumstances, when the international environment does not represent a clear and imminent threat, states often have a range of policy options to choose from, rather than a clearly optimal policy dictated by international circumstances."<sup>85</sup>

Many realists would discount these situations as "low politics." However, Norrin M. Ripsman dismissed those realists who claim that national security issues qualify as "high politics", while other issues like economics fall under "low politics."<sup>86</sup> Ripsman's primary argument is that issues like economics can be treated as "high politics." However,

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<sup>83</sup> Kevin Narizny, 'On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics', p.162

<sup>84</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Politics* (New York and London: 2001), p.31

<sup>85</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.29

<sup>86</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, 'False Dichotomies: Why Economics is High Politics', *Matthew B Ridgway Center for International Security Studies -Ridgway Center Working Papers*, Issue 11, 2006, pp.1-16

there is a wider ramification here, as well. Namely, neither history nor the world of international affairs and foreign policy resolves solely around dramatic situations where the state's survival is at stake. Instead, international politics also operates between those decisive historical moments, and realism is alive and well in those situations too.

As a dictum derived from classical realism states: “Inhumanity is just humanity under pressure.”<sup>87</sup> To paraphrase, while sometimes systemic pressures do put an individual state into a situation where its behaviour needs to be guided by survival logic, the systemic pressures are not always of that kind and of that intensity. While Narizny makes an interesting case highlighting complexities that are inevitable when it comes to the equally complex theoretical tradition that is realism, there is a whole set of policy cases that are not driven solely by the exclusive logic of survival. These policy cases can still be analysed using a context salient, and the elaborate causal mechanism and analytical framework offered by NCR.

With that in mind, Randal Schweller’s insistence upon the notion of state interest and political goals as opposed to neorealist concepts of power capabilities and threats holds a high degree of salience for the Serbian case.<sup>88</sup> As another study in NCR suggests, a good analysis does not give advantage to either power resources or intentions when predicting the state’s foreign policy, but takes the two into account. As this study says: “‘A does do what A can do’, that is, a resource-driven argument, rather than ‘A does do what A wants to do’, an intent-driven argument. I would rather suggest that ‘A does do what A wants to do and can do.’”<sup>89</sup> It is insufficient to rely solely on the systemic factors but to analyse intentions and interests that differ from one political unit to another as well. Unit-level processes also play a role in shaping and defining a state’s interest alongside the systemic forces impacting the individual state.

The description is salient as Serbia lacks international power capabilities, except in its region, the Balkans. Still, it is also overburdened by its domestic political divisions. In

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<sup>87</sup> William C. Wohlforth, ‘Realism and foreign policy’, p.36

<sup>88</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: 1998), p.22

<sup>89</sup> Bertil Nygren, ‘Using the neo-classical realism paradigm to predict Russian foreign policy behaviour as a complement to using resources’, *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 4, July 2012, p.518

that context, Serbia fits into what Schweller called a lamb state: “Lambs are weak states in that they possess relatively few capabilities and/or suffer from poor state society-relations for a number of reasons: their elites and institutions lacks legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the masses; they are internally divided along, ethnic, political, class, religious, or tribal fault lines;<sup>90</sup> or they are what Samuel Huntington calls torn countries... .”<sup>91</sup> Schweller argued that being that lambs are prey, they sometimes choose to bandwagon with the more powerful state, and sometimes distances itself from the most threatened ones.<sup>92</sup> One can say that Serbia fits into that description because it considers itself to be extremely vulnerable within the international system and it is burdened with domestic divisions, meaning it tries to avoid alienating any of the major external powers.

The second notion of NCR that this study builds on is the insistence on domestic politics, or in the words of Stephen Walt NCR “places domestic politics as an intervening variable between the distribution of power and foreign policy behaviour.”<sup>93</sup> Unlike the metaphors of black box or billiard balls associated with neorealism, NCR by including domestic politics in its causal mechanism perceives the state in its full complexity, and not as a unitary, homogenous actor insulated from the rest of the society. In doing so, NCR traded parsimony for accuracy and policy relevance.<sup>94</sup> As such, NCR addresses the issues of state-society relations and domestic political agency.

Regarding state-society relations, NCR renounces the neorealist logic of state by forming a unique whole of state-government apparatus and a wider society or a nation. As Zakaria, being one of the NCR authors who reintroduced the state-society dichotomy that was previously present in the work of classical realists, puts it: “Foreign policy is made not by the nation as a whole but by its government.”<sup>95</sup> However, while Zakaria was much

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<sup>90</sup> Some of these traits may apply for the present-day US, a country that is far for being a vulnerable lamb state. For an example of scholarship predicting that countries like the US may face increasing domestic polarization in the post-Cold War world, see: Michael C. Desch, ‘War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?’, *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No. 2, Spring 1996, pp.237-268

<sup>91</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p.87

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.87-88

<sup>93</sup> Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition’, in Ira Katznelson and Helen. V. Milner (eds), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York, 2002), p.211

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p.211

<sup>95</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role* (Princeton, NJ: 1996), p.9

more interested in the state's ability to mobilise material resources from its society, Thomas Christensen's concept of national political power holds a value for the Serbian case as it demonstrates the two-way street that exists between the state and society.

Thomas Christensen defined national political power as "the ability of state leaders to mobilise their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives."<sup>96</sup> This concept reflects the reality in which Serbia's political elites have competed to gather society's support for different conceptions of the state's foreign policy. Christensen, as the founder of the concept, stressed that leaders that do not face substantial domestic political hurdles would very quickly mobilise society's resources and support for their foreign policy initiatives, while those facing significant domestic political hurdles will deviate from the patterns predicted by the black box structural concepts.<sup>97</sup>

Precisely because NCR scholars like Christensen recognise the domestic hurdles, they renounce the idea that states are unitary actors whose political leadership is insulated from the societal pressures and backlashes from their domestic political base. This assessment is accurate, regardless of the nature of the political regime. A pair of researchers used NCR's insights to deduce that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević, during the negotiations that preceded the Kosovo War of 1999, could not meet the Western demands on Kosovo, even though he was faced with a more powerful force. By using the logic of his domestic interests and political survival, the two concluded that Milošević could not yield without a fight, as he built his image of a leader by inciting nationalism with his constituents, including by invoking the symbolic sanctity of Kosovo for Serbian people.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately this brings us to domestic political agency, which is relevant for the Serbian case as the political parties and their leaders use foreign policy to compete for influence.

Moreover, the vulnerability to the opposition's criticism represents a political hurdle for every power holder in Serbia. One author provides us insight into the role of domestic actors: Jack Snyder, in his book that is considered a pioneering piece of work for the new

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p.11

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>98</sup> Balkan Devlen, Özgür Özdamar, 'Neoclassical Realism and Foreign Policy Crisis', in Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James (eds), *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Baltimore: 2009), pp.136-163

generation of realists “Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition” (1991). While Snyder is not frequently mentioned as a representative of NCR, one of NCR’s most notable representatives, Jeffrey Taliaferro, includes him in the category, qualifying him more narrowly as a member of the defensive neoclassical realism.<sup>99</sup> This study primarily dealt with great powers that would overexpand due to political systems dominated by various interest groups that would compete and compromise, eventually resulting in a self-defeating foreign policy. That way, domestic politics disrupt the dictum that the state behaves strategically in accordance with the logic of the international system. That is why Snyder can be included in the category of NCR, although he dedicates for a realist disproportionally close attention to domestic factors. In Snyder’s world, just like in the world of NCR, domestic politics disrupted systemic pressures.

Snyder’s concepts will not be strictly implemented, but his study has utility for Serbia. In Serbia’s case we also talk about a political system, with weak institutions dominated by interest groups that are political parties and their leadership. One can say that Serbia is caught in what Snyder described as “blowback”, a phenomenon in which political elites become entrapped by the rhetoric they used to gather domestic support for their policies, either out of intellectual confusion or because they cannot afford to denounce their initial rhetoric and policy justifications.<sup>100</sup> In a way, Serbian political elites frequently suffer from a form of “blowback”, having convinced its constituents that close ties with Russia can be pursued without any risks.

Another NCR academic familiar with the dilemma of party divisions is the already cited Randall Schweller. He examined the cases of Britain and France between the two world wars, who failed to form an effective alliance to balance Nazi Germany as the systemic logic mandates. As Schweller stressed: “States respond (or not) to threats and opportunities in ways determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites, who must reach consensus within an often decentralised and competitive political process.”<sup>101</sup> By analysing these cases, Schweller identified four unit-level causes that

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<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘Security Seeking under Anarchy’, p.135

<sup>100</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp.41-42

<sup>101</sup> Randall L. Schweller, ‘Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing’, *International Security*, Vol.29, No. 2, Fall 2004, p.164

condition states to go against the systemic/balance of power mechanism. These are elite consensus about the nature and extent of the threat; elite cohesion, that is, the degree of persistent internal divisions within the central government's leadership; social cohesion in the balancing society; and regime or government vulnerability to political opposition.<sup>102</sup> If one eliminates the notion of balancing and applies it to the Serbian case, one can see that all four points are applicable.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter defined the theoretical and conceptual framework of analysis for this study, which is NCR. While there are many great theoretical traditions in IR that can have a shot at the selected case study, like Innenpolitik, liberalism and social constructivism, NCR was chosen as a theory that offers a suitable causal mechanism that integrates empirical data uncovered in the course of research.

This chapter viewed NCR compared to the previous two, older versions of the realist tradition, classical realism and neorealism. It first identified what realism is and what are the traits shared by all versions of realism. Readers were introduced to the pioneers of classical realism, E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau; classical realism played a major part in the inception of the realist tradition and IR discipline. However, their focus on statesmanship, human nature and national interest lacked the rigorous theoretical and scientific character.

As opposed to that, Kenneth Waltz pioneered neorealism identified causality at the level of the international system. In doing so, Waltz provided realism with what classical realists failed to do. It gave it parsimony, theoretical and methodological rigour and a more scientific character. However, neorealism also had its failures and its critiques. With its insistence on systemic factors, neorealism failed to predict some significant international occurrences, like the abrupt end of the Cold War. It has attracted critics who point out that it cannot be used to analyse specific policies. In that context, this chapter

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<sup>102</sup> Ariel Ilan Roth, 'A Bold Move Forward for Neoclassical Realism', *International Studies Review*, Vol.8, No. 3, September 2006, p.1

also pointed out that neorealism can be useful for the selected case study but that it is limited by leaving out unit-level factors, making it unsuitable for individual foreign policies being a general IR theory.

Based on this, the selected case study required a theory of foreign policy and not a theory of IR, giving credibility to the use of NCR. A definition of NCR was provided to the readers, including its emergence in the IR lexicon and academia, and the critical pieces of NCR scholarship. NCR made an essential contribution by noting that the state's response to systemic influences is dependent on the unit-level factors that act as an intervening variable between the international system and the state's foreign policy.

NCR qualified itself as a suitable framework of analysis, one that has reconciled numerous traditions within its scholarship, and bypassed their shortcomings. NCR has been able to combine the context-salient emphasis that classical realism puts on state-society relations and statesmanship with the systemic, scientific, theoretical precision of neorealism. That way, NCR has asserted itself as a descriptive theory able to analyse specific policies in a given historical period, finding itself at the crossroads between IR and diplomatic history. With its combination of systemic and domestic factors, NCR has also succeeded in reconciling realism and Innenpolitik tradition and integrating insights of FPA into a realist worldview. The policy relevance and foundation of NCR in practice also makes it adequate for this case study.

While NCR has three versions: NCR as the explanation to anomalies of neorealism; NCR as a theory of foreign policy; and NCR as a theory of IR, the study will only employ the first two versions, as Serbia is not a great power whose behaviour produces systemic outcomes. Consequently, further study will rely on two general themes of NCR: the notion that not all states respond in the same manner to the international system and the relevance of domestic politics. The first theme is relevant as it is essential to determine why Serbian behaviour is so different from the behaviour of other countries in its region and in light of Serbia lacking power capabilities. The second theme is also relevant as it involves the reliance on domestic hurdles, state-society relations and the elite in explaining how Serbia responds to international stimuli. As NCR is primarily concerned

with the international system and its influence, the next step is to identify systemic forces causing the Serbian balancing act.



## **CHAPTER III: INDEPENDENT VARIABLE - INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMIC PRESSURES**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As the previous chapter outlined NCR as a conceptual and theoretical framework, this chapter needs to analyse the systemic factors. That approach is necessary as NCR, just like any other realism, stresses that the international systemic pressures are the primary force of causation in international politics. Consequently, there is a need to identify systemic stimuli that impacted the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2020. For NCR authors, foreign policy is primarily about a state responding to the international systemic processes. Empirical research has established Serbian foreign policy to be “more reactive than proactive” because Serbia mostly reacts to processes which it is “exposed to externally.”<sup>103</sup>

Serbia’s systemic environment as it pertains to its balancing act is marked by the unresolved Kosovo dispute, regional power vacuum caused by the Western distraction from the region, and occasional tensions between Russia and the West, which became particularly acute after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. Serbia starts to hedge its bets in that systemic environment by diversifying partnerships and compensating for any stagnation in the EU integration process. On top of that, Serbia increasingly used Russia as leverage with the West. By balancing and playing Russia and the West against each other, Serbia hopes to better bargain with the West, including on Kosovo.

In that context, we need to clarify what is meant by the use of the term ‘systemic’. This study will treat as systemic any process and event that shapes Serbian foreign policy behaviour that is not a product of domestic dynamics but of Serbia’s external environment. Here, the words systemic and international are not used interchangeably. Namely, as some academics pointed out, the concept of the system is meaningless without interaction.<sup>104</sup> If sovereign states, as the fundamental unit of the international system,

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<sup>103</sup> Author’s interview with Pavle Jevremović, a retired Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>104</sup> Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: 1993), p. 29

interact, this interaction is international. Furthermore, as international politics operates within the framework of the international system, these interactions are inevitably systemic as well. The international system operates through the interaction of its units, which means that state A will respond to the behaviour of state B.

Moreover, the systemic pressures to which Serbia responds in its foreign policy behaviour affect Serbia through international interaction, like in the case of the Kosovo dispute that is shaped by a great power dynamic. In that context, systemic pressure is any occurrence that affects Serbia externally and that propels Serbia to conduct its balancing act. As such, these occurrences come from the external environment and are not the product of unit-level factors.

In doing this, chapter 3 will first identify the nature of the international system, and it will try to go beyond the binary debate about whether the post-Cold war system is unipolar or multipolar. The system will be identified as a hybrid system, a uni-multipolar system. This distinction is relevant as it identifies three global powers around which the analysed policy revolves: the EU, the US and Russia. Moreover, it shows that these powers are not in the same power ranking. Most importantly, it explains that these three powers form a single causal whole, as the same set of systemic processes drives the Serbian balancing act between these three powers. Therefore, some other great powers like Japan or China, and regional powers like Turkey, are not analysed as they are not part of the same set of systemic processes.

This chapter identifies, through research, three systemic processes that have enabled and propelled the Serbian balancing act. The research entailed analysing secondary source materials and fieldwork research in Serbia, where interviews with relevant sources were conducted. The first systemic process is the independence of Kosovo and the international dispute that followed. This dispute is viewed in a systemic context as Kosovo's independence came about due to Western support. In turn, Serbian foreign policy began to be dominated by the Kosovo dispute. As a result, Serbia had to rely on Russian backing, putting Belgrade in a state of systemic dependency on Moscow. The prevalence of the

Kosovo dispute has a systemic effect as it cannot be resolved by Serbia alone and without the external, great powers.

The second systemic process behind the Serbian balancing act is the regional power vacuum that emerged in the Balkans in 2008. Namely, after the global financial crisis of 2008 that overspilled onto the EU in the form of the Eurozone crisis, the EU's ability to continue enlargement to the Balkans has been disrupted. The fact that the world's sole superpower, the US, did not consider the Balkans to be a priority also helped create the regional power vacuum. This power vacuum continued to deepen with other occurrences that diverted the EU's attention, like the migrant crisis and Brexit. In those circumstances, Russia seized the opportunity by stepping in through more assertive policies. For local nations like Serbia that became stranded on the Western periphery, external powers like Russia provided an opportunity to engage in hedging through diversification of partnerships and leveraging the West by balancing and playing the West and Russia against each other. The ultimate fate of the power vacuum that acted as a permissive environment both for Russian policies in the region and Serbian balancing will be determined by the exercise of US might.

The list of systemic processes that impacted the Serbian balancing act does not end with the Kosovo dispute and the regional power vacuum, though the balancing act exists primarily because of these two processes. However, the balancing act implemented during the twelve years was not always be the same. On the contrary, the policy of balancing is different in both its form and intensity depending on the circumstances of a given period. The form and intensity of balancing are frequently dictated by the rivalry between Russia and the West. Russian overtures towards the Balkans often correspond with Moscow's feuds with the West in 2008 and post-2014. When the West-Russia relations are not burdened with rivalry, Serbia can balance without any strategic or diplomatic tensions. However, when these relations become confrontational, Serbian balancing becomes much more pronounced and riskier. The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 is a turning point for such behaviour. Indeed, after the Ukraine Crisis, Serbia found itself in a

position where it had to start balancing more openly.<sup>105</sup> In those circumstances, Serbia tries to maintain balance to minimise dangers and profit by playing Russia and the West against each other and building better bargaining power with the West in the process.

### 3.2 The International System

If one examines the international system as a factor influencing Serbian foreign policy, one will first have to make a specific assessment of its nature. Since the end of the Cold War there has not been consent in the IR discipline on the nature of the international system. The debate fluctuated most frequently between those who stressed the unipolarity, like Charles Krauthammer and William Wohlforth, and those who spoke of a new multipolarity, like Henry Kissinger and Christopher Layne.<sup>106</sup>

As one study accurately observed: “Polarity is a theoretical construct; the international systems only approximate various polar ideal types.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, this study is in line with the work of theorists, such as Samuel Huntington, Barry Buzan, and Colin Dueck. These authors claimed that the international system is a hybrid combination of unipolarity and multipolarity, a uni-multipolar system. In this system, the US is the only superpower. The other powers are great powers operating on the global level of the international system, and regional powers.<sup>108</sup>

The international system structure is described through the formula 1+4, where the US is the only superpower, followed by four globally relevant great powers: the EU, Russia,

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<sup>105</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>106</sup> Charles Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No.1, 1 January 1990, pp. 23-33; William C. Wohlforth, ‘The Stability of a Unipolar World’; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: 1994); Christopher Layne, ‘The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No.4, 1993, pp. 5-51

<sup>107</sup> John G. Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, ‘Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences’, in John G. Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: 2011), p.5

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Huntington, ‘The Lonely Superpower’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No.2, March/April 1999, pp. 35-49; Barry Buzan, and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: 2003), p.37; Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: 2015), pp.203-204

China, and Japan,<sup>109</sup> with the first two being major players in the Balkans. Considering that “interaction is crucial to the concept of system, for, without it, the term system has no meaning,”<sup>110</sup> this study will consider Serbia’s balancing act between three global powers that are most active in the Balkan region: two Western powers, namely the US and the EU, and Russia.

Some other actors will be left out of this study. This study will have to treat Western European powers, such as Germany, France, and even the UK, as part of a larger whole, namely the EU. Naturally, there are instances when individual countries, most notably Germany, make consequential decisions. However, the EU weighs prominently in Serbian foreign policy considerations. Therefore, the most effective way to analyse Serbian foreign policy towards individual Western European powers is in the EU context. This framing also helps in terms of analytical and conceptual elegance.

Japan will not be analysed as it is not a Balkan player, and this study also leaves China out. China has unquestionable great power status, and its engagement with the Balkans has increased under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, China is a newcomer to the Balkans. More importantly, the systemic forces driving Chinese engagement with Serbia are different from those applying to Serbian interaction with Russia and the West, the Kosovo dispute, the power vacuum, and West-Russia rivalry. Serbia’s relationship with Turkey will also be left out of this study, as Turkey is a regional power and not a global power, meaning that Turkey is not part of the same systemic, power dynamic impacting Serbian balancing.

By using the international system to analyse Serbia’s foreign policy, one can observe a specific pattern. The full shift towards the balancing act happened in 2008 as a result of two processes. The first was Kosovo’s independence. Serbia found itself on this issue on the opposite sides to the US and most of the EU members that recognised Kosovo’s independence (save for Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). Simultaneously, the US did not consider the Balkans a priority as it was more dedicated to other regions

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<sup>109</sup>Barry Buzan, and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p.446

<sup>110</sup>Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*, p. 29

of the world, like the Middle East. For the EU, the great power replacing the US as a geopolitical stabiliser in the Balkans, Serbia, and the rest of the region became secondary priorities as the EU became engulfed in the global financial and Eurozone crises. As such, the West does not act with the same level of efficiency as it did before 2008.

These trends created the second process. As EU became distracted with its internal problems and other crises, e.g. the migrant crisis, a state similar to regional vacuum emerges, and within that environment, Russia conducts a more assertive policy, frequently through overtures towards Serbia whenever Russia senses that the West is strategically neglecting the Balkans.<sup>111</sup> With the Kosovo issue and the regional power vacuum, Russia saw an opportunity to return to the Balkans as it began to recover from the traumas of the 1990s. As such, it had a greater ability and ambition to be more assertive in the Balkans. This ambition is particularly pronounced when Russian relations with the West are adversarial. When that happens, Russia starts to perceive the Balkans as a place to counter the West for its intrusion in the post-Soviet space, and use the Balkans' territorial dispute as a precedent in the post-Soviet frozen conflicts.

As Serbia became burdened with the Kosovo dispute and as it became evident that it would remain stranded on the Western periphery without the possibility of changing that with EU membership, Russia began to resurface in Serbian foreign policy. As Kosovo started to move towards independence, Serbia sought a great power willing to back its case. Serbia needed Russian support in opposing Kosovo's independence internationally, primarily through the Russian veto in the UN Security Council. Serbia was also discouraged by the global financial crisis and the fact that its EU path was destined to be uncertain. This change instilled a perception among Serbian leaders that the EU and the West were vulnerable and that Serbia needed to develop alternative partnerships with non-Western powers, including Russia.

This impulse to balance is even more powerful when Serbia notices increased rivalry between Russia and the West. Then Belgrade tries to avoid the risks of aligning with one

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<sup>111</sup>Francisco de Borja Lasheras, Vessela Tcherneva, and Fredrik Wesslau, 'Return to instability: How migration and great power politics threaten the Western Balkans', *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, 21 March 2016, p.2

of the two sides and tries to profit from balancing between external powers. With that in mind, this helps to identify three systemic processes conditioning the Serbian balancing act, and that will be individually assessed in more detail: the Kosovo dispute, the regional power vacuum in the Balkans, and the state of relations between Russia and the West.

### **3.3 The Kosovo Dispute**

The international dispute caused by Kosovo's independence is the first systemic process that shaped the Serbian balancing act during the designated period. Some interviewees have defined the issue of Kosovo as "an absolute parameter and axiom" of Serbian foreign policy.<sup>112</sup> At first glance, this process might fit more into the definition of an international rather than a systemic process. However, the Kosovo dispute will be analysed as a systemic process because it has that kind of effect on Belgrade's behaviour.

That is to say, since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, UN Security Council Resolution 1244 placed Kosovo under UN administration while acknowledging Yugoslav sovereignty over the territory. The ultimate fate of Kosovo prevalingly resides in the hands of great powers. Kosovo's independence came about due to great power politics, namely through the military intervention and later diplomatic recognition by the key Western powers. Simultaneously, the resolution of the Kosovo dispute cannot be conjured without the involvement of great powers, which in this case involves the West and Russia. This setting implies that Serbia's most critical issue is dependent on the broader systemic dynamic of great power constellations.

As Kosovo started to move towards independence, the West and Russia took different stances on this issue. The US and most Western capitals were convinced that independent Kosovo would be the adequate and final closure of the Kosovo issue. On the other hand, Russia saw the opportunity to expand its influence in Serbia, and by extension in the Balkans, by supporting the Serbian case on Kosovo and promoting its vision of European and international affairs.

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<sup>112</sup>Author's interview with Pavle Jevremović, a retired Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, May 2019

With the independence of Kosovo, the Serbian foreign policy elite found itself in a dilemma. The first option for Serbia was to insist solely on the Kosovo issue and pursue a counter-secessionist policy. This option would entail closer ties with Russia and full abandonment of its EU aspirations. Abandoning the EU path would imply that Serbia gives up on its leading economic partner, whose members geographically encircle Serbia. The continuation of the EU path would entail accepting Kosovo's independence, a non-starter as Belgrade perceived it as an unjust outcome.

Serbian foreign policy took a middle road on which it perseveres to this very day. The middle road is the "controlled process" in which Serbia upholds the principle of its territorial integrity while still keeping an option open of joining the EU one day when the Kosovo issue gets resolved.<sup>113</sup> However, in lack of a Western ally on the Kosovo issue, Serbia had to find another great power willing to back its case on Kosovo. For Serbia, burdened with the Kosovo dispute, Russia was the only viable option. As Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat, told the author: "The balancing that began in 2008 started because of Kosovo ... We had to start balancing our relations with Russia primarily because of Kosovo. Balancing is in play because the West was pressing us severely as we could not find common ground with them on Kosovo."<sup>114</sup>

Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian defence minister, similarly stated: "Serbia found itself in a situation where, objectively, it does not have an honest, genuine ally that would help it develop primarily according to its own interests. Instead, Serbia is finding itself between a rock and a hard place, East and West."<sup>115</sup> Maxim Samorukov, from the Carnegie Moscow Center, agreed: "Because there were no good alternatives to that [Russian support]. The West did not provide any way out for Serbia in this situation. They forced Serbia into Russia's embrace, so I would not really blame Serbian leadership for making this choice because actually, they had no choice."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Author's interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>114</sup> Author's interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>115</sup> Author's interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>116</sup> Author's interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019



Indeed, the Serbian balancing act revolving around the Kosovo dispute shows a strong systemic logic. Serbia invokes and nurtures partnership with Russia because Serbia has no major partner in the West on the Kosovo issue. As it lacks any other alternative, Russia becomes a factor and a necessity for Serbia. However, this logic does not imply a rigid binary divide where Serbia cuts its ties with the West and establishes a full-fledged partnership or alliance with Russia: it would be strategically irrational for Serbia to turn its back on the West and pivot towards Russia, even in light of differences on Kosovo. Why would that hypothetical pivot to Russia be strategically irrational?

Firstly, Serbia is economically dependent on the EU. In 2019, the EU constituted 62 per cent of Serbia's total trade, with 66.3 per cent of Serbian exports and 58.2 per cent in Serbian imports. In contrast, Serbia's trade with Russia and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was 8 per cent of Serbia's total trade, with 5.4 per cent of exports and 9.4 per cent of the country's import.<sup>117</sup> From January 2010 to September 2019, the EU constituted 72.27 per cent of net foreign direct investment in Serbia, while Russia with 11.21 per cent was second.<sup>118</sup>

Secondly, Serbia is geographically encircled by countries that are either members or aspiring members of Western institutions such as the EU and NATO. Geographic logic plays a prominent role in Serbia's desire to join the EU. Serbia's neighbours Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, and Croatia in 2013. In the case of NATO, two of Serbia's neighbours, Montenegro and North Macedonia, joined the alliance in 2017 and 2020. Therefore, the reality of geographical encirclement by NATO and the EU is highly pronounced for Serbia. In that regard, it is worth remembering that for NCR geography falls under the category of "structural modifier", meaning "a class of material variables

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<sup>117</sup> Vladimir Međak, 'Sporazum o stabilizaciji i pridruživanju Srbije i Evropske unije i Sporazum o slobodnoj trgovini sa Evroazijskom ekonomskom unijom (The Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia and the Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union)', *Council for Strategic Policy*, 17 March 2020, <https://cfsp.rs/2020/03/17/sporazum-o-stabilizaciji-i-pridruzivanju-srbije-i-evropske-unije-i-sporazum-o-slobodnoj-trgovini-sa-evroazijskom-ekonomskom-unijom/>, accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>118</sup> Strahinja Subotić, Miloš Janjić an Anesa Omeragić, 'Foreign Economic Involvement in Serbia: Net investment and most significant foreign projects', *European Policy Centre*, 31 March 2020, <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/foreign-investments-in-serbia/>, accessed 18-12-2020

at the level of the international system or a regional sub-system, but which are not structural.”<sup>119</sup>

Thirdly, the West outguns Russia in terms of power capabilities, including in the Balkans. Russia has an economy dependent on gas exports that in 2019 was slightly bigger than the US state of Texas.<sup>120</sup> Situation will no change in the foreseeable future as Russia is fighting with the fallout from COVID-19 pandemic like everybody else. According to the World Bank, Russia’s 2020 GDP growth contracted by 3 per cent due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the US with a military presence through NATO, Russia has no military forces in the Balkans to project its power. Moreover, Russian military spending of USD 61.7 billion in 2020, is outmatched by the US spending of USD 778 billion.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, even in the context of the Kosovo dispute, Serbia cannot make a pivot to a Russia that is not a peer competitor to the West, neither globally nor in the Balkans.

This Serbian tendency to try and form partnerships with both Russia and the West is neatly explained with a concept developed by two Serbian political scientists, Dragan Živojinović and Dragan Đukanović, called “the complex of the 1990s.” This “complex” is the constant fear that Serbia will be left alone and without allies – as in the 1990s. The “complex” was triggered by Kosovo’s independence and the slowdown in the process of European integration after the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>123</sup>

These two academics invoked a puzzle highlighted by political scientist Glenn Snyder, who pointed out that states face a specific form of security dilemma in which they either risk facing a security threat alone (without allies) or risk losing their autonomy within an

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<sup>119</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.40

<sup>120</sup> Samuel Stebbins and Grant Suneson, ‘Does Texas or Russia have the larger GDP? Here’s how US states compare to other countries’, *USA Today*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/04/17/how-gdp-of-us-states-compares-to-countries-around-the-world/39295197/>, accessed 18-12-2020

<sup>121</sup> ‘Russia Economic Report No.45’, *The World Bank*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/rer>, accessed 24-06-2021

<sup>122</sup> ‘World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020’, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>, accessed 24-06-2021

<sup>123</sup> Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović ‘Strateška partnerstva Republike Srbije (Strategic Partnerships of Republic of Serbia)’, in *Godišnjak FPN 2011 (Yearbook FPN 2011)*, Year 5, Number 6, December, (Belgrade: 2011), pp.300-301

alliance. As Snyder noted: “The obverse of the fear of the abandonment is the fear of entrapment. ... As the cost of abandonment is a serious loss of security, the cost of entrapment is an extreme form of lost autonomy.”<sup>124</sup> Serbia, in a way, found itself in a situation similar to the dynamic Snyder described. The EU remained the guiding principle of Serbian foreign policy to overcome “the complex of the 1990s” and avoid international isolation as under Milosevic. However, embracing the EU as an alliance was likely to result in a loss of autonomy, which would mean accepting an unpopular settlement to the Kosovo dispute. Serbia could not pursue EU membership with the same drive and dedication as before, as this policy became more difficult after 2008 and continues to be so today.

At some points, which will be examined in more detail in the empirical chapters, Serbia would occasionally tilt towards either the EU or the US if Belgrade perceived them as more suitable partners on Kosovo. The period between 2012 and 2014 resulted in particularly close ties between Serbia and the EU, as it was during that period that an agreement on normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, the so-called Brussels Agreement, was achieved under EU mediation.<sup>125</sup> However, the declining clout of the EU in the Balkans, especially post-2014, also led to the EU’s failure as a mediator on Kosovo. Boško Jakšić, a Serbian diplomatic commentator, elegantly summarised this failure: “Some results on technical agreements were reached, but if the result of an entire decade of talks is agreement on dial code and car licence plates, it is extremely underwhelming.”<sup>126</sup>

Something similar happened in regards to the Serbo-American relations. As deadlock in the Belgrade Priština dialogue carried on, the US became more acceptable for Belgrade as a great power that should be persuaded to influence Priština. Slobodan Samardžić explained this shift: “The US was a distant observer, except in some crises when they would get involved directly, particularly in the last one to two years when the EU lost control of that enlargement and accession process. The EU lost its role as a decisive mediator between Serbia and Albanian institutions in Kosovo. And as such, the US acts

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<sup>124</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: 1997), p.181

<sup>125</sup> Author’s interview with Tanja Mišćević, a political science professor, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>126</sup> Author’s interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

more like something of an active, corrective factor. ... We see that the US assumes the main role in this process of a transition into the so-called final phase of resolving the Kosovo issue.”<sup>127</sup> During the presidency of Donald Trump, it appeared that Serbia could get a better deal on Kosovo. Even though Kosovo’s independence was an irreversible process for the US, the Trump administration had a more relaxed position towards Belgrade, leading Serbia to see a more positive role for the US as a partner that can secure a more beneficial agreement in this dispute.<sup>128</sup> Naturally, with the electoral defeat of Donald Trump in November 2020, this attempt of developing a *modus vivendi* with the US also failed.

However, Russia was never eliminated from the Serbian policy agenda (despite occasional attempts to do so) to engage with the EU and the US on Kosovo. As long as the Kosovo issue remains in play, Serbia will have to keep the Russia option alive in hopes of getting a less painful settlement of the dispute. As Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Serbian parliament, told the author: “Russia and particularly China strengthened their international position which creates the illusion of an easy resolution of the Kosovo dispute. This is unlikely to happen, but it leaves an open space to regulate some things about the position of the Serbian population in Kosovo, the position of Northern Kosovo and its autonomy, property, cultural monuments.”<sup>129</sup>

However, resolution of the Kosovo dispute remains elusive, particularly in regards to the three great powers. An introvert EU unable to enlarge to the Balkans cannot act as an effective mediator of the region’s remaining conflicts and disputes, including Kosovo. Consequently, the resolution of the Kosovo dispute rests on the role of the US. In the words of one interviewee: “That is the main problem - that without the United States, it cannot be resolved. Only the United States has the ability, capacity, and resources to

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<sup>127</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>128</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>129</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

resolve the issue. Maybe they do not have the commitment, but they have the ability and capacity.”<sup>130</sup>

The list does not end there. On the Kosovo issue, partnership with Russia is necessary for Serbia, but it is also a challenge and an impediment. For Russia, an unresolved Kosovo dispute ties Serbia, the most consequential country of the Balkans, to Russia, providing Moscow one of the last remaining sources of influence in the Balkans, and a bargaining chip in hypothetical great power bargaining with the West. Serbia is in a state of uncomfortable systemic dependency on Russia, as Russia opposes any settlement of the Kosovo issue, denying Russia the opportunity to ask something in return from the US.<sup>131</sup> Therefore, the resolution of the Kosovo conundrum will reside with the US, Russia and the EU, leaving Serbia in a challenging position to balance these powers to try and get some concessions in this hypothetical scenario.<sup>132</sup> This cements the Serbian reality where the Kosovo issue is not just an international, territorial and diplomatic dispute, but also a systemic constraint. It is a process dependent not on Serbian conduct but on the great power dynamic. Certainly; there is no ultimate end date for the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West, as there is no end date for the resolution of the Kosovo issue.<sup>133</sup>

### **3.4 The Power Vacuum in the Balkans**

The next external force behind the Serbian balancing act that will be examined is the regional power vacuum. For realists who apply Kenneth Waltz’s “images” - or levels of analysis as J. David Singer renamed the concept<sup>134</sup> - the international system acts as a permissive cause of foreign policy behaviour, while unit-level factors are treated as an

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<sup>130</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>131</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019; Author’s interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>132</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>133</sup> Author’s interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>134</sup> J. David Singer, ‘The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations’, *World Politics*, Vol. 14, No.1, October 1961, pp.77-92

efficient cause.<sup>135</sup> In that regard, the regional power vacuum acted as a permissive environment for non-Western powers like Russia to be more assertive in the Balkans. It also created an incentive for Serbia to engage in its balancing act.

How and when did this power vacuum happen? The starting date was 2008 when the global financial crisis was unleashed, overspilling onto the EU with the Eurozone crisis. After the financial crisis, the EU slowly lost interest in the Balkan region, which became “terra incognita” as one Serbian diplomat told the author.<sup>136</sup> The Eurozone crisis has paralysed the EU’s ability to enlarge to the Balkans and removed the region from the EU’s strategic priorities list. This crisis has made the Balkans “the periphery of the periphery” within crisis-laden Europe and has led the EU to adopt a “wait and see approach” towards enlargement.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, Belgrade took note that starting with the budgetary year of 2009, the number of visits by the EU officials to both Serbia and the region decreased compared to the period between 2000 and 2007.<sup>138</sup>

Worth highlighting is that the power vacuum did not become all-encompassing with the global financial crisis, just that the financial crisis marked the beginning of this process. Equally important is that the power vacuum does not imply the complete European absence from the region. After all, Montenegro and Serbia began their accession talks in 2012 and 2014, respectively,<sup>139</sup> Croatia joined the EU in 2013.<sup>140</sup> However, after Croatian membership, the notion of enlargement fatigue became stronger, questioning the possibility that others may join Croatia anytime soon.<sup>141</sup> In those circumstances, the EU

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<sup>135</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, State and War*, pp.232-234

<sup>136</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>137</sup> Dimitar Bechev, ‘The periphery of the periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro crisis’, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, 30 August 2012, pp.1-2

<sup>138</sup> • Author’s interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>139</sup> ‘Enlargement: new enlargement methodology will be applied to Montenegro and Serbia’, *Council of the EU*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/11/enlargement-new-enlargement-methodology-will-be-applied-to-montenegro-and-serbia/>

<sup>140</sup> ‘Croatia celebrates on joining EU’, *BBC*, 1 July 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23118035>, accessed 25-09-2021

<sup>141</sup> Gjergji Vurmo, ‘The EU and the Western Balkans – Serving the purpose of enlargement’, *BiEPAG Blog*, 20 September 2021, <https://biepag.eu/uncategorized/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-serving-the-purpose-of-enlargement/>, accessed 25-09-2021

enlargement resembles more of a bureaucratic process rather than a genuine policy game-changer.<sup>142</sup>

As a result, the EU is not out of the region, but its main leverage, the prospect of enlargement, is weakened. This is best summed up by scholar Ivan Krastev who stated: “The EU has the power of attraction, but its transformative powers are more limited.”<sup>143</sup> The EU has not left the region, and the prospect of membership is an attractive long-term prospect. However, because this prospect is distant, EU’s leverage is reduced, and so is the incentive for a country like Serbia to base its foreign policy solely on the EU aspiration. This creates an opening for power like Russia and creates an incentive for Serbia to do short-term and mid-term hedging by engaging Russia.

The crisis of 2008 strengthened all the voices within the EU that already existed that believed that the EU is not ready for further enlargement, a move that has to be postponed as long as possible.<sup>144</sup> All these occurrences, “created such an odium against further enlargement that no one at that time considered the fact that in politics and geopolitics, just like in a human body, there is no such thing as a vacuum. So, there is a space. It is empty, as someone has emptied it. Immediately, someone else (e.g. Russia) jumps into that empty space, and that is what started to happen here.”<sup>145</sup> As another interviewee said: “Russia started to prepare itself back in 2004, and they only waited for the right opportunity to execute their policy. During 2008 and 2009, through a unilateral declaration of Kosovo’s independence and economic crisis, there has been a visible retreat of the EU from our region in every sense. That space was filled by someone else, by someone who was not necessarily stronger, but willing enough to fill that space that was

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<sup>142</sup> Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Vessela Tcherneva, ‘Is the EU losing the Western Balkans? What local experts think’, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, 5 August 2015, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/is\\_the\\_eu\\_losing\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_what\\_local\\_experts\\_think3093](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/is_the_eu_losing_the_western_balkans_what_local_experts_think3093), accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>143</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, ‘Serbia’s Foreign Policy: Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place?’, *The National Interest*, 14 October 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/serbia%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy-stuck-between-rock-hard-place-11454>, accessed 25-09-2021

<sup>144</sup> Author’s interview with Tanja Mišćević, a political science professor, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>145</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

left empty with minimal efforts. That space is filled, and for now, they are holding it. It will be tough to change that space.”<sup>146</sup>

In that chaotic regional and systemic environment, the EU no longer played a prominent role in Serbian foreign policy. The role of the EU in Serbian foreign policy since 2008 became “minimal”, “because after 2008 and Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence there is a crisis in the EU and the EU’s declining presence in Serbia. There was still insistence on integration, and there were various stages. The integration process has commenced, but the EU’s influence on foreign and security policy has been minimal. It was greater in 2008, as opposed to after 2008.”<sup>147</sup>

In January 2012, then Serbian Foreign Minister Jeremić spoke at a Serbian Ambassadors’ Conference. In this conference, Jeremić explained the systemic forces that continue to shape Serbia and its balancing act to this very day. He spoke on the emergence of a new “multipolarity” and “high level of geopolitical volatility”,<sup>148</sup> a view shared by the Serbian foreign policy elite to this very day. Jeremić further observed that non-Western powers were looking for their share of international spoils while referring to “Russia’s renewal.” He also observed the crisis that had hit the EU and the bloc’s diminished the capacity to act assertively in the Balkans – not least its inability to absorb a country like Serbia.<sup>149</sup> The fact that Serbia faced a dilemma Kosovo or the EU never escaped Jeremić, including while making this statement. However, it is equally certain that Serbian elites were becoming aware that the EU, burdened with other issues, has less desire to dedicate its efforts to the region. Therefore, decreasing Belgrade’s resolve to follow the EU’s lead, including on Kosovo.

Within this systemic context, all Serbian governments are aware that the pursuit of EU membership is their safest strategic bet in the long-term. Therefore, no government in

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<sup>146</sup> Author’s interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Address Before the Fifth Serbian Ambassadors’ Conference by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia’, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade, 16 January 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/vuk-Jeremić-speeches>, accessed 18-10-2019

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



Belgrade can afford to demote EU membership as the primary goal. However, simultaneously Serbian politicians are aware that the EU cannot offer Serbia membership. The reasons for this are numerous, internal crisis in Europe, unresolved Kosovo dispute, and unfinished domestic reforms. Thus prompting Belgrade to look for other partners in the international system. This change instilled a perception among Serbian leaders that the EU and the West were vulnerable and that Serbia needs to develop alternative partnerships with non-Western powers, including Russia. As Boris Tadić, former Serbian President noted: “We are moving towards the EU that has a crystallised system of the human society, but that does not mean that the EU is invulnerable ... Therefore, Serbia has been developing a policy of alternative pillars with China, Russia, Japan and Brazil.”<sup>150</sup> There is no evidence that Serbia achieved anything substantial in its ties with Japan and Brazil. While Tadić’s mention of these countries is probably a political name-dropping, his statement does inform us of the Serbian logic in engaging powers like Russia and China.

However, the Serbian balancing act does not revolve solely around the logic of hedging through diversification of partnership, but also around the Serbian desire to develop leverage with the West by playing the Russia card. When Belgrade looks at its systemic environment, it observes a world in flux, where non-Western powers like Russia fill the void whenever and wherever Western powers are not present. Serbia perceives Russia as a form of balance whenever hope is lost in the fundamental strategic commitment, a relatively accelerated accession to the EU.<sup>151</sup> In this state of vacuum, where the Balkans is neglected, for a country like Serbia “balancing and playing off rival powers in order to reap short-term benefits at the expense of long-term public interest” becomes the dominant strategy.<sup>152</sup>

The state of a power vacuum did not end solely with the Eurozone crisis of 2008. The EU is incapable of engaging Serbia and the Balkans with the same proficiency as in the past. The challenges that the EU faced, like the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit,

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<sup>150</sup> Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović ‘Strategic Partnerships of Republic of Serbia’, p.310

<sup>151</sup> Author’s interview with Sonja Liht, a former President of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia and President of the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Belgrade, June 2019

<sup>152</sup> Dimitar Bechev, ‘The periphery of the periphery’, p.2

have also made the EU more introverted and unable to act effectively in Serbia and the Balkans.<sup>153</sup> The role of the EU's enlargement policy in Serbian foreign policy "from the moment of Brexit is becoming even more difficult, more confused,"<sup>154</sup> as "everybody is looking at the UK to see how things will unfold."<sup>155</sup> As a Serbian MP explained: "The West openly pulled back taking their own needs into account. Today, they think that Europe will sort out its affairs, and then be back after ten years to continue with the enlargement process. I tell them that is great but do not expect that the *status quo* awaits you in ten years."<sup>156</sup>

The enlargement as the primary form of the EU's strategic leverage lost its credibility, not just because of the crisis impacting the EU, but also because the voices within the EU that oppose further enlargement are getting more impactful on the policy.<sup>157</sup> As Spyros Economides put it, the idea of EU enlargement went "from fatigue to resistance." Economides explains that unlike the past when there was a debate on how to correct the mistakes associated with EU enlargement as in 2004 and 2007, today, the discussion is on the future of EU enlargement and the consequence of receiving new EU members.<sup>158</sup> Tired of constant waiting without any adequate progress towards membership, Serbia and other EU membership candidates are more encouraged to accept overtures from external powers offering various forms of economic and political cooperation, as well as religious and cultural solidarity.<sup>159</sup> Thus, the vacuum continues to provide Belgrade with a chance to play its balancing act.

The power vacuum also shapes Serbian balancing in regards to the US, as the lack of US interest has also contributed to the power vacuum in the Balkans.<sup>160</sup> After 2000,

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<sup>153</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.16

<sup>154</sup> Author's interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>155</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>156</sup> Author's interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>157</sup> James Ker-Lindsay, Ioannis Armakolas, Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat, 'The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, Spring 2017, p.519

<sup>158</sup> Spyros Economides, 'From Fatigue to Resistance: EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans', *Dahrendorf Forum IV*, Working Paper No. 17, 20 March 2020, p.3

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

<sup>160</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

Washington began to lose interest in Serbia and the Balkans, as the region was no longer the theatre of violent conflicts, and as the Milošević regime was overthrown. This process has been further exacerbated by 9/11, which redirected US attention away from the Balkans and towards other regions, passing the buck of stabilising the Balkans to the EU, making it the main external guarantor of regional security in the Balkans.<sup>161</sup> This trend was cemented after 2008 as the US continued passing the buck to the disoriented EU, as Washington struggled with its financial crisis, reset with Russia, pivot to Asia, and its military engagements in Afghanistan and the Middle East.<sup>162</sup>

This systemic reality poses a significant challenge for Serbian foreign policy. While Serbian relations with the US were marked with the bitter legacy of the 1990s and the disagreements on Kosovo, Serbia cannot resolve the Kosovo issue nor improve its regional positions without establishing a new form of relationship with the US.<sup>163</sup> The problem for all Serbian governments since the fall of Milošević's regime in 2000 was that this partnership could not be formed. In a systemic context, where the Balkans are not a priority for the US, Serbia could not expect the same level of dedication from the US, as was received by other post-communist Eastern European states in the 1990s. One can say that Serbo-American ties are marked with what a Serbian expert on the US, Dragan Živojinović called a "mutual wishful thinking."<sup>164</sup> In that context, Serbia has an unrealistic expectation of reenacting a *modus vivendi* with the US from the days of the Cold War. However, Serbia no longer has the same strategic weight as the former Yugoslavia did. The US also has an unrealistic expectation of Serbia becoming uncompromisingly pro-Western, although Serbia's recent history is different from the other post-communist countries.

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<sup>161</sup> Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, 'The Balkans after 11 September', *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 01 October 2001, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/de/publikationen/detail/article/the-balkans-after-11-september/>, accessed 02-02-2017

<sup>162</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>163</sup> Author's interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>164</sup> Dragan Živojinović, 'US – Yugoslav Relations during Cold War: Inadequate Model for Contemporary Relations', in Ljubinka Trgovčević (ed), *125 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between the USA and Serbia* (Belgrade, 2008), p.169

While every Serbian government after 2000 has proclaimed promoting good relations with the US as one of the foreign policy priorities,<sup>165</sup> the US could not make a shift in its Balkan policy. The US was losing interest in the Balkans, as it no longer perceived it as a strategic priority deserving major US attention. That left the planning of the US policy towards the region in the hands of State Department bureaucrats, without the political capacity to make an innovative Serbian policy.<sup>166</sup> This was a significant impediment for US-Serbian relations. It was evident that without a major strategic change regarding the region, one will not see a completely new US policy towards Serbia, and Belgrade will not be able to improve the relationship with Washington.

Despite this impediment, Serbia tries not to make the US an enemy, making relations with the US part of Serbian balancing policy. This policy is based on the systemic reality of enormous disparity in the distribution of power between the two countries, which forces Serbia to establish a cordial, working relationship with the US. Serbia is aware of US primacy in the international system, and this has been present in the official policy narrative. The Serbian National Security Strategies from 2009 and 2019 both stressed Serbian desire and a necessity to improve and strengthen ties with the US, despite disagreements on issues like Kosovo.<sup>167</sup>

Indeed, the role of the US in Serbian foreign policy is “enormous” even when the US is not “in a front-row” as Serbian leaders see the US as “a global leader” shaping the world, including the Balkan region. As the US interest is not always aligned with Serbian interest, the Serbian elite, including the incumbent coalition between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), try to develop leverage vis-à-vis the US, on Kosovo and bilateral ties, by balancing between the EU and Russia.<sup>168</sup> This is the reality acknowledged by most of the interviewees, regardless of their party

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<sup>165</sup> Nataša Dragojlović, Stanislav Sretenović, Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović (eds), *Serbian Foreign Policy*, pp.278-319

<sup>166</sup> Robert M. Hayden, ‘From Allies to Enemies to Wary Friends’, in Ljubinka Trgovčević (ed), *125 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between the USA and Serbia* p.140

<sup>167</sup> ‘National Security Strategy of Republic of Serbia’, Belgrade, October 2009, pp.11-12, accessed 04-03-2021; ‘National Security Strategy of Republic of Serbia’, Belgrade, December 2019, pp.7, 16, accessed 04-03-2021

<sup>168</sup> Author’s interview with Zoran Lutovac, a former Serbian Ambassador and President of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

affiliations. As former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Živković told me: “We must recognise that the US’s significance and influence in world politics has consequences, including for Serbia. So, it is very important what Washington thinks of Serbia, at least as important as the opinion of Brussels, and slightly more important than what Moscow and Beijing think.”<sup>169</sup> Even for the conservative, anti-Western Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and its president Miloš Jovanović, this systemic reality is self-evident, as the power that the US wields and the memory of the 1990s created a sense of “apprehensiveness and awe” towards the US in Serbia. Consequently, even for the DSS, the “relations with the US are not friendly, but since it is the superpower, the relations cannot be overly hostile as Serbia cannot afford it.”<sup>170</sup>

The US did not, however, wholly disengage from the region. On the contrary, the US has the ambition of being engaged in the region until it is stabilised so that the 1990s US “policy products” are preserved. This primarily refers to the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the independence of Kosovo. The US is focused on finishing this task in order to dedicate its attention and resources to other regions more fully. It needs to be underlined that both of these two issues, Bosnia and Kosovo, directly concern Serbia which is why Serbia is still on the US radar, although to a limited extent. For the US, integrating Serbia and the Western Balkans in a network of Western institutions, namely the EU and NATO, is an essential part of this stabilisation effort.<sup>171</sup> As the later empirical chapter will show, post-2014 the US re-activated itself in the Balkans when it rolled back Russian influence in the Balkans by pushing for the NATO membership of Montenegro and North Macedonia, shattering Moscow’s ambition to derail NATO expansion in the region.<sup>172</sup> During this time, Serbia unsuccessfully tried to build something of an alliance with the Trump Administration. The empirical analysis will show how this ultimately failed with the electoral defeat of Donald Trump. However, the systemic and geopolitical

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<sup>169</sup> Author’s interview with Zoran Živković, a former Serbian Prime-Minister and President of the New Party, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>170</sup> Author’s interview with Miloš Jovanović, President of the DSS and Professor in International law and International Relations at the University of Belgrade, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>171</sup> ‘A conversation with... Marc Grossman’, *The American Interest*, Vol.2, No.6, 1 July 2007, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/07/01/a-conversation-with-marc-grossman/>, accessed 04-02-2017

<sup>172</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

reality is that the US remains a superpower. Even with limited engagement, thanks to its power capabilities, it can step in when the EU fails and can outmatch Russia.

Although the Balkans remain “diplomatic underbrush” for the US, as one US journalist described it in 2005, for Serbia the US will remain a factor that will be taken into account in foreign policy considerations, given that country’s superpower position in the international system. Until either a major systemic threat emerges that will foster a firmer relationship between the USA and Serbia, as it did in the past (Germany on two occasions, and the Soviet Union later), and/or a significant change in Serbian and US policy, the relationship between the two will most likely remain “formal but weary friendship.”<sup>173</sup>

Given this systemic reality of US leadership, Serbia will continue trying to secure a healthy *modus vivendi*, making the US equally important in the balancing policy as the EU and Russia. This will be difficult to achieve with the presidential administration of Joseph Biden, as Serbian leadership constantly fears that Biden’s administration will be tougher on Belgrade in regards to both Kosovo and ties with Russia and China. However, Serbia will continue to balance its relationship with the US, the same way it does with its ties with the EU and Russia. How the US acts towards Serbia might well be the decisive systemic force that might end both the power vacuum in the Balkans and the Serbian balancing act.

Given that the EU remains a long-term foreign policy goal of Serbia, it is doubtful that any Serbian government will give up on EU membership. However, given that in the short and medium-term, that goal will remain elusive for Serbia, the country will try to diversify its foreign policy partnerships until that happens, and try to use Russia to build bargaining power with the West. Nevertheless, this opportunistic policy can be pursued only as long as there is a strategic leeway. As the EU lacks the clout to impose restraint on both Russian activities in the Balkans and Serbian balancing, it is up to the US to act on behalf of the West. In the words of Russian political scientist, Ekaterina Entina: “The US is more attractive than the EU. It promises nothing, but when it acts, it acts effectively, with a

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<sup>173</sup> Robert M. Hayden, ‘From Allies to Enemies to Wary Friends’, p.133

clear message ... and quickly.”<sup>174</sup> The answer to the questions how long and to what extent will Belgrade continue to play its current game lies in Washington.

### 3.5 West-Russia Relations

Ultimately, the state of relations between Russia and the West is the third systemic processes shaping Serbian balancing act. However, there is a caveat. The Kosovo dispute and the regional power vacuum remained the systemic forces that came into being in 2008 and shaped the Serbian balancing act during the designated period. The state of relations between Russia and the West, and whether those relations are cooperative or confrontational, do not act as independent causal forces of the Serbian balancing act. The Kosovo dispute and the power vacuum play that role. One can say that Serbia balances not because the relations between Russia and the West can become more turbulent as they briefly were in 2008 with the Russo-Georgian war, or dangerous as they have been since the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, but despite these tensions.<sup>175</sup>

The tensions between Russia and the West do not cause the Serbian balancing act, but these tensions help shape the form and intensity of that balancing. If the relations between Russia and the West are relatively peaceful, the balancing act can be done with relative tranquillity. However, suppose the West-Russia relations become dominated by tensions, hostility and rivalry. In that case, the balancing becomes more tenuous and riskier, but it also becomes more intensive. Serbia ups the ante on its balancing act to hedge against any potential risks and try and profit from the competing powers by playing them one against the other. The validity of this assertion will be tested during the empirical chapters. The three stages of a Serbian balancing act during the designated period correspond with periods of rivalry between Russia and the West.

It needs to be stressed that when Russia boosted its engagement with Serbia on the Kosovo issue and when the Serbian balancing act commenced in 2008, this was when the relations between Russia and the West were on a downward spiral. It was when Russia

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<sup>174</sup> Ekaterina Entina, ‘Southeast Europe in Russia’s Current Foreign Policy’, *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, Issue No.2, 2019, p.78

<sup>175</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

started opposing the US hegemony and Western attempts to expand NATO and the EU into the post-Soviet space.<sup>176</sup> In that context, Russia uses the Balkans and Serbia to counter the Western international order and reassert itself as a great power that deserves its seat at the table, after years of weakness and humiliation in the 1990s.<sup>177</sup> When Russia is in rivalry with the West, it becomes more interested in the Balkans. If Russia is excluded from the Balkans, it is excluded from European affairs, and unable to play a more significant role internationally. In the words of Barry Buzan, and Ole Wæver: “Russians are not generally willing to sacrifice much for the Serbs. They saw support for Serbia as important to gaining acceptance of the principle that Russia should be heard both because it is a global great power (UN Security Council logic) and because it is a European great power.”<sup>178</sup>

By having leverage in Serbia and the Balkans, particularly on sensitive issues like Kosovo, Russia has a potential bargaining chip to employ in deal-making with the West. This is particularly important, as Russia has found a direct link between Kosovo’s independence and territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space. In both the case of the Georgian War of 2008 and the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, the independence of Kosovo was invoked by Russia, both as precedent and a way of deflecting Western criticism, accusing the West of hypocrisy with the Kosovo example. Russian journalist Konstantin Von Eggert stated: “The Balkans are this eternal example to which you can recur in the Russian Foreign Ministry or in the Kremlin whenever you need to tell the Westerners to go to hell with their advice.”<sup>179</sup>

For Serbia, interested in gaining leverage with the West and acquiring a protector on Kosovo, a Russia that wants to show strength to the West is a suitable partner. However, Serbia since 2008 mostly tried avoiding getting embroiled in a major conflict between Russia and the West. During the period between 2008 and 2012, when the balancing act

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<sup>176</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019; Author’s interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>177</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Serbs Are Not “Little Russians”’, accessed 08-09-2018

<sup>178</sup> Barry Buzan, and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p.430

<sup>179</sup> ‘Panel I: The Balkans in Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy’, *A LSEE-SEESOX Public Event Russia in the Balkans*, 13 March (London, 2015), [http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/LSEE/Events/2014-2015/Russia-in-the-Balkans/Russia%20in%20the%20Balkans\\_2015-03-13.aspx](http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/LSEE/Events/2014-2015/Russia-in-the-Balkans/Russia%20in%20the%20Balkans_2015-03-13.aspx), accessed: 05-02-2017



commenced, Belgrade avoided aligning itself too closely Moscow, despite the latter's support on Kosovo, as Serbia did not want to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or join the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as an observer.<sup>180</sup> The same can be said of Serbia's later decision not to recognise Russian annexation of Crimea.<sup>181</sup> During the later stage between 2012 and 2014, Serbia did its balancing in a calm manner without causing any frictions. This situation was not the product of Serbian policies, but of the fact that the West was still prepared to tolerate ties with Russia as there were no overwhelming tensions with Russia, especially as the Ukraine Crisis has not yet happened.<sup>182</sup>

As will be elaborated in the empirical chapters later on, there is an evident difference in the Serbian balancing act's intensity depending on the period during which that policy is implemented. These changes in intensity account for various stages in the Serbian balancing act depending on the period, and at no point was this reality more evident than after the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis. In that context, the Ukraine Crisis represented "the moment before and after" for Serbian foreign policy.<sup>183</sup>

As the Ukrainian Crisis caused the lowest point in West-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War, the Balkans started to be perceived as one of the locations where Russia can oppose the West at low-cost and low-risk. In this conflictual systemic environment, and with Eastern Europe becoming the theatre of rivalry between West and Russia, the Balkans became "Europe's soft underbelly",<sup>184</sup> a region that might again set off a spiral of crisis and violence if left to its own devices. Within that "soft underbelly", Russia can instigate a controlled crisis to pressure the West, primarily the EU, and distract them from the Ukraine.<sup>185</sup> In doing so, Russian policy in the region became one of "a spoiler power",

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<sup>180</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>181</sup> Author's interview with Vladimir Medak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>182</sup> Author's interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Branko Milanovic, 'The Balkans: Europe's Soft Underbelly', *The Globalist*, 1 June 2013, <http://www.theglobalist.com/the-balkans-europes-soft-underbelly/>, accessed 30-01-2017

<sup>185</sup> Ivan Krastev, 'The Balkans are the soft underbelly of Europe', *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/2287ba66-8489-11e4-bae9-00144feabdc0>, accessed 23-12-2020

trying to undermine Western initiatives like NATO expansion and EU enlargement.<sup>186</sup> As EU membership of the Balkan countries, unlike potential Ukrainian membership of NATO, does not directly impact Russia's security, Russia can bolster strong ties with Serbia and the Balkans. Once these countries join the EU and/or NATO, they can either strengthen the group of countries within the EU that are friendlier towards Russia or create a division within NATO.<sup>187</sup>

The EU also started to be concerned about the Russian factor in the Balkans. Before the annexation of Crimea and the emergence of the Russian-backed insurgency in Donbas, the Balkans was not on the Western agenda; the EU was more tolerant of Serbian ties with Russia.<sup>188</sup> Before the Ukraine Crisis, the EU could tolerate Serbia "hanging in the middle", because this type of policy would not be atypical of other European countries, and even Germany was at the time in "the camp of engagement" with Russia.<sup>189</sup> The EU and the West observed a very similar situation in the Balkans as in Donbas, one of a depressed, impoverished post-socialist region that people are moving from, that still can flare-up with the interference of some malign foreign power, like Russia.<sup>190</sup>

Serbia began to be increasingly fearful of the dangers and risk that came from the option of aligning with either West or Russia. The Ukraine Crisis generated a more turbulent external environment for Serbia. Serbia perceived this environment as a dangerous landscape of great power rivalry that could overspill onto Serbia, and where Serbia might be forced to choose between the two sides. As Đukić told the author: "Serbian foreign policy must remain ambivalent up until the moment when the great power relations reposition themselves differently. ... Today we have the new Cold War. For small countries, like Serbia and its foreign policy, the only thing that remains is to carefully

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<sup>186</sup> Dimitar Bechev, 'The Influence of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans', *European Western Balkans*, 01 July 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/07/01/the-influence-of-russia-and-turkey-in-the-western-balkans/>, accessed 09-02-2017

<sup>187</sup> Robert Coalson, 'Russia Follows 'Different Strategy' As Serbia Courts the EU', *Radio Free Europe*, 08 July 2014, [www.rferl.org/a/russia-different-strategy-serbia-eu/25449771.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-different-strategy-serbia-eu/25449771.html), accessed 15-02-2017

<sup>188</sup> Author's interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>189</sup> Author's interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>190</sup> Author's interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

observe everything that goes on and avoid becoming a victim in the new configuration of the world.”<sup>191</sup>

Consequently, the Ukraine Crisis forced Serbia to balance more openly.<sup>192</sup> Mićunović neatly summarised the Serbian policy of balancing after the Ukraine Crisis: “With new diplomatic clashes between Russia and the West, it became increasingly difficult to balance. The new government, led by SNS, came to power which advocated friendship with Russia in a more boastful fashion. However, it still persevered on the obligations it assumed from the previous governments, the orientation towards the EU, and cooperation with NATO through Partnership for Peace, counting to remain neutral that way.”<sup>193</sup>

How did this change come about? Again, the rivalry between Russia and the West did not cause the Serbian balancing act, but it has intensified it by intertwining with the other two systemic realities shaping Belgrade’s policies, the Kosovo dispute and the power vacuum, causing Serbia to diversify partnership. Indeed, Serbia could not side with Russia, as it was about to start accession negotiations with the EU, and it could not side with the EU, as it could alienate Russia from whom it was buying gas and whose support on Kosovo Serbia still needed.<sup>194</sup> As Međak explained: “From the foreign policy standpoint, for us, the crisis in Ukraine is a lose-lose situation. Whatever we do, we will experience a setback. If we back the Russians, we create a setback in the EU association process. If we back the EU, we create a problem for ourselves on Kosovo.”<sup>195</sup>

In that chaotic systemic environment, Serbian foreign policy’s primary consideration has been to decrease “the level of confrontation” with the EU and the US, and “increase cooperation capacity with all the other countries”, particularly Russia.<sup>196</sup> This logic

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<sup>191</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>192</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>193</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’ of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>194</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>195</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>196</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

towards Russia has become pronounced regarding the diversification of partnerships, and the issue of Kosovo still dominates the political theatre both domestically and internationally. Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said in a conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in 2016: “If it were not for Russia, Serbia would be in a much more difficult position.”<sup>197</sup> For the Serbian elite, the best option was to try and stay away from the West-Russia conflict as much as it can.

Apart from minimising the risks associated with the rivalry between the West and Russia after the Ukraine Crisis, another logic kicked in due to this crisis. Namely, Serbian leadership believed that in the systemic context of the great power rivalry involving the West and Russia, the West starts to perceive Russia as a threat. In that environment, Serbia can build ties with Russia to strengthen its leverage with the West. Serbian political science professor Tanja Mišćević said that the logic was: “If Europe does not want us, we have kept good relations with other players, and we can use them to maintain the balance.”<sup>198</sup>

That leverage can be applied in numerous situations. It can be to get a better bargain on Kosovo; to manipulate the EU to speed up the accession process, get a geopolitical deal on a partnership with the US, and even get the West to turn a blind eye to domestic illiberalism. Serbia hopes that it will extract concessions and better deal with the West if it has a Russian option available in all of these situations. Former Serbian Foreign Minister Vladislav Jovanović was very blunt on this issue in 2014. He authored a newspaper article when Serbia chaired the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In this article, Jovanović urged Serbia to resist the US and the EU’s pressures to join their “offensive policy towards Moscow”, as that would eliminate the possibility for Serbia to “milk two cows at the same time.”<sup>199</sup> This outlook led Zoran Živković, former Serbian Prime Minister, to call this policy “hypocritical”, as Serbia is

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<sup>197</sup> ‘Ministers Dacic and Lavrov discuss bilateral relations, political situation and migrant crisis’, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia*, 1 April 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/15304-ministers-dacic-and-lavrov-discuss-bilateral-relations-political-situation-and-migrant-crisis>, accessed 11-02-2017

<sup>198</sup> Author’s interview with Tanja Mišćević, a political science professor, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>199</sup> Vladislav Jovanović, ‘OEBS kao minsko polje (OSCE as a Mine Field)’, *Večernje novosti*, 26 December 2014, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.299.html:526248-Vladislav-Jovanovic-OEBS-kao-minsko-polje>, accessed 15-02-2017

still going in the direction of the EU, while the government in Serbia since 2012, and more forcefully since 2014, portrays itself as Putin's best associate in this region."<sup>200</sup>

Paradoxically, the return of great power rivalry in Eastern Europe, involving Russia, led the US to pay much closer attention to Serbia and the Balkans. During the Trump years, by expediting NATO enlargement and engaging Serbia, the Russian influence in the region was rolled back. For a while, it even appeared that Serbia would pivot towards the US. The rivalry between the West and Russia is not over, and it will continue to impact Serbian behaviour. As long as Russia is treated as a rival by the West, the risk that Serbia will be faced with the ultimate choice will continue to loom. Belgrade will try to avoid making this choice as long as it can.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has identified and analysed the systemic pressures that caused and shaped the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2012. These systemic pressures were identified through research that entailed analysing the secondary source materials and fieldwork interviews with sources in Serbia. The research findings fit into the realist paradigm on which this study is based, that believes in the primacy of the international systemic pressures as the driving force behind the state's behaviour. The research identified three systemic pressures that shaped the Serbian balancing act. These systemic pressures were: the independence of Kosovo and the international dispute it caused; the regional power vacuum in the Balkans; and the state of relations between the West and Russia, that became confrontational in the wake of the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014.

Before these systemic pressures were analysed deeply, the chapter first examined the nature of the post-Cold War international system. The international system was identified as a uni-multipolar system, a hybrid between unipolar and multipolar system, where the US is the only country with superpower status. At the same time, the EU, Russia, China and Japan are great powers operating on the global level of the international system. The

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<sup>200</sup> Author's interview with Zoran Živković, a former Serbian Prime-Minister and President of the New Party, Belgrade, February 2019

analysis leaves out Serbian interaction with Japan and China. The former was left out because it is not a major player in the Balkans. In contrast, the latter was left out because its interactions with the Balkans and Serbia are more recent and not guided by the same systemic forces as the US, the EU and Russia. Therefore, by using the criteria of interactions, these three powers were identified as the global geopolitical players that are most active in the Balkans, and that are part of the same set of systemic forces, shaping the Serbian balancing act: the Kosovo dispute; the power vacuum; and the state of relations between the West and Russia.

The Kosovo dispute is the first external process which propelled Serbia to balance between Russia and the West. The reliance on Russian protection and veto in the UN Security Council became Belgrade's strongest asset on Kosovo, putting Serbia in a systemic dependency on Russia. Serbia was forced to pursue a partnership with Russia on account of the Kosovo issue, as it could not find common ground with the West. Serbia could not entirely turn its back on the West, as the West outperforms Russia in power capabilities, and remains Serbia's primary partner in terms of economy and security. However, due to Kosovo, Serbia started its balancing act. The Kosovo dispute is treated as being not just an international dispute, but as a systemic force affecting Belgrade's behaviour. The Kosovo issue's resolution has been in the hands of great powers since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, and its independence is the product of support by Western powers. Even today, that issue cannot be resolved without great powers, while Russia does not want to see the Kosovo issue resolved unless it can get something in return from the US in a great power bargain. Until the issue gets resolved, Serbia is systemically tied in its balancing act.

The second systemic process in 2008 that contributed to the Serbian balancing act during the designated period was the regional power vacuum. The vacuum was created in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, engulfing the EU with the Eurozone crisis. The lack of US attention that was focused elsewhere also helped form this vacuum. As the EU could not continue with enlargement in the region, there was an empty space in the region and Serbia found itself on the European periphery. The vacuum provided a permissive environment for Russia to act more assertively in the Balkans.

Moreover, the vacuum provided Serbia with the leeway and incentive for its balancing act. As Belgrade could not count on a viable European perspective, it tried to hedge its bets by diversifying partnerships, including with Moscow, while also using Moscow as leverage with the West. Later on, the power vacuum intensified with the migrant crisis and Brexit, generating an even stronger desire from Serbia to continue balancing and playing Russia and the West against each other. The duration of this power vacuum will depend on US policies in the region, as the EU remains strategically unprepared. At the same time, during Trump's presidency, one could see that the Russian influence in the Balkans was rolled back due to US opposition. How the US behaves in the future will remain the systemic limitation on Serbian balancing.

At the very end, the chapter analysed the third systemic process behind the Serbian balancing act, which is the state of relations between Russia and the West. This chapter stressed that this factor is not an independent causal factor. That role is left to the previous two systemic processes, the Kosovo dispute and the regional power vacuum. The chapter established that Russia-West relations act as a systemic factor that does not cause the Serbian balancing act. Instead, it helps shape its form and intensity.

This notion will be essential later on when the reader reaches the empirical chapters, explaining different stages in Serbian policy. Namely, if the West-Russia relations are peaceful, Serbia can pursue its balancing with relative tranquillity. Serbian balancing becomes more tensious if these relations become confrontational due to the more dangerous environment, but Serbia also intensifies its balancing. Although the Russian decision to back Serbia on Kosovo has been motivated by the Russian need to reassert itself as a great power and counter the West, this balancing could be done, as the rivalry between two sides was not at its zenith.

In that regard, Serbia even managed to balance in the state of full tranquillity between 2012 and 2014. However, after the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, that led to the breakdown of relations between Russia and the West, Serbia found itself at risk of being forced to choose. To avoid making a choice between the EU that Serbia wanted to join, and Russia that was still regarded as an essential partner, Serbia intensified balancing. More

importantly, in the context of the increased rivalry between Russia and the West, Serbia strengthened its policy of balancing and pitting Russia and the West against each other, hoping that the Russian card will increase its bargaining power with the West.

The chapter listed and examined three systemic pressures that caused the Serbian balancing act between 2008 and 2020, and its differences in intensity and manifestation during different empirical stages. The research findings back the realist logic that emphasises that pressures from the international systemic environment shape a state's behaviour. However, the identification of systemic processes does not provide a full explanation of foreign policy behaviour. Therefore, as the NCR causal mechanism dictates, it is also essential to identify the unit-level factor at play that acts as an intervening variable, which will be done in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER IV: THE INTERVENING VARIABLE - PARTY POLITICS

### 4.1 Introduction

When NCR is the analytical framework, one must identify the critical intervening variable within the domestic level of analysis. This chapter will also explain why party politics in Serbia is the intervening variable within NCR's theoretical framework. The intervening variable represents a decisive factor in NCR's causal mechanism. The systemic pressures to which Serbia is exposed to are adapted for domestic consumption by the Serbian elite with the goal of remaining in power.<sup>201</sup> Domestic factors act as translating filters between international pressures and Serbian behaviour.

The research conducted through study of theoretical and empirical materials and fieldwork interviews established that Serbian party politics plays the role of that filter, fitting NCR's qualification of an intervening variable. A cautionary remark must be provided that this study in NCR's spirit does not ascribe causal independence to party politics and intra-elite competition. However, it highlights continuity in how political parties utilise international events and foreign policy issues, with political parties acting as unit-level, intervening variable that filters and distorts systemic influences.

The reader will first be introduced to the concept of an intervening variable, the role that domestic factors play in the realist worldview and the novelty that NCR scholarship brought in the IR discipline by introducing domestic elements as the intervening variables. While NCR theorists have been frequently accused of the lack of parsimony due to the *ad hoc* selection of intervening variables, the attempts were made to make precise identification of the domestic elements that qualify as the intervening variable. An explanation will be provided as to why party politics as the intervening variable applied to the Serbian case fits well with this effort to have a precisely defined intervening variable. More importantly, this research fills the gap left by NCR scholarship. There have been NCR scholars like Jack Snyder, Randall Schweller, and Colin Dueck, who paid

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<sup>201</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019; Author's interview with Pavle Jevremović, a retired Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, May 2019

attention to the role of party politics. However, their research involved states with great power status and mature constitutional democracies, unlike small states that lack great power capabilities with semi-functional, hybrid political systems like Serbia. Unlike NCR theories, this study will analyse the conflict and competition between Serbian political parties that use foreign policy in that competition, which is precisely why party politics is the intervening variable.

Within this chapter, party politics is compared to the other two unit-level factors, policymakers' perceptions and public opinion. The perceptions of Serbian policymakers judging from both their public statements and the interviewees' insights is that there is a powershift propelled by Russia's resurgence and China's rise. These shifts are giving rise to the new multipolarity. The stalemates between Russia and the West are seen as analogous to the Cold War, and Serbia is sometimes seen as similar to Tito's Yugoslavia. However, these perceptions are mostly a product of a simplistic, instinctive reaction to the global events that are later adapted for a domestically popular narrative, rather than a serious analysis forming Serbian policies.<sup>202</sup> Public opinion is more relevant, mainly because Serbian political parties are susceptible to public moods. However, public opinion is part of the broader fabric of party politics fighting for domestic turf and not an independent process.

The chapter will also explain the context of the Serbian political system. This context is essential so that the reader can understand how the system based on parochial interest and weak democratic institutions enables the political parties and their leadership to dominate public policies and the political spectrum. Partisanship is a dominant reality even under the incumbent hybrid, illiberal regime in Serbia, as there is still a multi-party system in Serbia. With that in mind, this chapter will show three ways in which foreign policy is being used in the party competition. Thus, acting as an intervening variable filtering systemic pressures.

The first way is that Serbian parties avoid domestically unpopular measures. This posture is the product of Kosovo's independence, where Serbian politicians must be engaged in

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<sup>202</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019

strong anti-secessionism, which requires them to use Russian backing and the growing Russian popularity. As alienating Russia is domestically unpopular, Serbian political leaders implement policies that will not be detrimental for their respective parties' domestic position, especially when it comes to their electoral chances. The second way is an extension of the previous one. Instead of risking alienating the electorate divided into pro-Western and pro-Russian camps, Serbian political parties to be competitive insist on the balancing act so that they can catch the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbs. Ultimately, using foreign policy can help political parties gain an advantage over their competitors, either by being promoted as an internationally acceptable political force or getting the support of great powers.

#### **4.2 NCR, the Intervening Variable, Party Politics and the Research Gap**

The intervening variable operating at the unit-level of analysis gives NCR an edge in analysing specific policy cases. The difference between three versions of the realist tradition, classical realism, neorealism, and NCR is the degree to which unit-level factors play a causal role within each one of these three versions.<sup>203</sup> In the NCR version, the intervening variable is a unit-level cause that mediates between systemic pressures and the individual state's behaviour. The intervening variable translates systemic pressures into a specific form of individual foreign policy behaviour. It accounts for the difference in how individual states behave when faced with the same set of systemic circumstances. Kenneth Waltz himself acknowledged that the introduction of the unit-level variable is necessary given that a systemic theory like the balance of power, for example, fails to account for the explanation of foreign policy or individual historical events.<sup>204</sup>

The intervening variable is the crucial element of NCR. While in the long term a state's foreign policy behaviour will converge with neorealist, systemic prediction, in the short term it is highly likely to diverge from systemic realities, creating the need to analyse domestic level factors.<sup>205</sup> As Thomas Juneau explained: "Intervening variables act as

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<sup>203</sup> Colin Elman, 'Appraising Balance of Power Theory', in John A. Vasquez, and Colin Elman (eds), *Realism and The Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: 2003), p.5

<sup>204</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp.121-123

<sup>205</sup> Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunities*, p.19

filters or transmission belts between the international distribution of power and the foreign policy outcome, explaining the conversion from the possible – the range of feasible outcomes – to the actual, the foreign policy choice. They are domestic political processes determining how usable power is translated into foreign policy, or how the opportunities and constraints shaped by power are translated into actual choice.”<sup>206</sup>

The intervening variable also helps overcome the dilemma of stressing systemic and unit-level factors that have burdened the realist theorists and the broader IR discipline. While not a representative of NCR, Thomas Risse-Kappen summarised this dilemma. He stressed that a “complex model of international politics has to be conceptualised which integrates the three levels of analysis: society, political system, and international environment.”<sup>207</sup> The use of intervening variables has attracted some criticism at the expense of NCR. These critiques said that by integrating unit-level factors like domestic politics and ideas, NCR provides “*ad hoc*” or “*post hoc*” explanations of anomalies of neorealism.<sup>208</sup>

Stephen Walt similarly criticised NCR on that ground, saying that: “Neoclassical realism tends to incorporate domestic variables in an *ad hoc* manner, and its proponents have yet to identify when these variables have greater or lesser influence.” Walt noted that NCR that way gave up on “generality and predictive power” for the sake of “descriptive accuracy and policy relevance.”<sup>209</sup> The issue of choosing the intervening variable has been with NCR since the introduction of the term by Gideon Rose in 1998. Back then, Rose acknowledged only two unit-level factors that act as intervening variables, the perceptions and misperceptions of policymakers, and state-society relations, emphasising the strength of state apparatus.<sup>210</sup> More recently, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell introduced a slightly broader and more detailed list of elements that can stand out as intervening variables, including: leader’s images, strategic culture, state-society relations,

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p.24

<sup>207</sup> Harald Müller, and Thomas Risse-Kappen, ‘From the Outside In and from the Inside Out: International Relations, Domestic Politics, and Foreign Policy’, in David Skidmore, and Valerie Hudson (eds), *The Limits of State Autonomy: Societal Groups and Foreign Policy Formulation* (Boulder: 1993), p.31

<sup>208</sup> Brian Rathbun, ‘A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism’, *Security Studies*, Vol.17, Issue 2, 2008, pp.294-295

<sup>209</sup> Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition’, p.211

<sup>210</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, pp.157-165

and domestic institutions.<sup>211</sup> In doing so, these authors tried to give NCR a greater theoretical precision and avoid the accusation of *ad hoc* selection of intervening variables.<sup>212</sup>

With this in mind, party politics is still relevant as an intervening variable. In Serbia, political parties and political leaders outweigh institutions and constitutional arrangements.<sup>213</sup> That is to say, political leaders operate in a political environment dominated by party politics, where all of their perceptions and strategic culture are affected by this fact. Simultaneously, political leaders and their political parties dominate the formal political institutions, while political parties are also the only effective transmission belt between the society and state. The party politics can be an all-inclusive factor that entails all the elements, cited by the NCR theorists, as the most frequent candidates for domestic, unit-level variables.

NCR has had a history of addressing the issue of party politics. For Peter Trubowitz, Jack Snyder's ideas - whose work has already been cited as thematically relevant for this study - represent a rare case of a realist scholarship analysing party and coalition politics' influence on foreign policy behaviour.<sup>214</sup> Randall Schweller's work on domestic politics affecting balancing action of great powers is relevant for this study, as Schweller shows how domestic political divisions and competition among the elites distort systemic pressures. Another NCR author who has factored party politics into his work is Colin Dueck, who focused on the President-Congress dynamic within the US political system that shapes foreign policy.<sup>215</sup> However, all of these studies appear to apply to great powers with much more systemic leeway than a small country like Serbia, with insufficient power capabilities. These studies also mostly focus on well-established and stable democracies, and not on immature, transitional democracies like Serbia, where the domestic environment is fragmented and divisive.

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<sup>211</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp.58-79

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.176-177

<sup>213</sup> Mladen Mladenov, 'An Orpheus Syndrome?', p.158

<sup>214</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: 2011), p.132

<sup>215</sup> Colin Dueck, 'Neoclassical Realism and the national interest: presidents, domestic politics and major military interventions', in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, pp.139-169

Beyond the NCR framework, a notable piece of scholarship is the 2011 book by Peter Trubowitz “Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft.” Trubowitz provides a model of grand strategy that combines systemic factors with domestic politics, namely partisanship. In this study Trubowitz, unlike in the NCR paradigm, gives causal primacy to domestic factors over systemic ones. However, Trubowitz has a fundamental observation about domestic politics as a factor in NCR’s conception. As Trubowitz said: “They [NCR authors] do not consider the competition and conflict between groups with different visions of the national interest, and shy away from arguments about domestic electoral and distributional conflicts over foreign policy.”<sup>216</sup> As such, this study will be a compromise between two approaches.

Namely, this study will use party politics as the intervening variable, and by doing so will act according to the NCR dictate that gives priority to systemic factors. However, it will also observe political parties in the context of competing elites and leaders who are organised in political parties, applying Trubowitz’s critique of NCR, while still upholding causal primacy of the international system. The Serbian political elites and political parties will be treated as opportunistic actors within a parochial, domestic scenery engaged in a political turf battle. These domestic actors will use in their mutual competition foreign policy issues to prevail in that same competition.

That way, when a significant systemic change takes place, like a power vacuum in the Balkans, that propels Russia’s more assertive presence in the region, Serbian political parties will try to leverage that. For instance, by using the Russian factor as an argument against the competitors advocating pro-Western foreign policy, or pursuing ties with Russia to avoid alienating pro-Russian elements of public opinion. How political parties leverage the systemic environment in their domestic competition varies depending on the circumstances; consequently, so does the balancing act. However, the leveraging of systemic factors by the elites and parties ultimately results in the Serbian balancing act, and as such, the causal mechanism fits into the NCR paradigm. This brings us back to Thomas Christensen concept of national political power, described in chapter 2, where national leaders try to gain support from the population for foreign policy initiatives, both

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<sup>216</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy*, p.4

in terms of popular support and the resources that need to be invested in certain policies. Applied to Serbia, Serbian politicians win electoral support by asking for support for their conception of Serbian foreign policy. It also means that Serbian politicians, once they are in office, are frequently stuck with the original script that they sold to their electorate. Thus, they are faced with the domestic hurdle interfering with systemic imperatives.

However, before one addresses party politics as the intervening variable, one will also have to briefly examine two other unit-level factors that are important for context: perceptions and public opinion. They are not selected as intervening variables because neither one is as all-encompassing of domestic forces affecting Serbian foreign policy as is party politics. Moreover, it is party politics through which these two unit-level factors are filtered. Foreign policy elites in Serbia do not act independently on them, but take them into account and frame them in the context of their party struggle to remain in or win power. Therefore, while party politics is not the only potential unit-level factor, it is treated as *the intervening variable* within this study.

In Serbia, political parties and their leadership are the most critical unit-level determinants of foreign policy within this study. This is the direct outcome of Serbia's political reality in which the political parties are the primary power holders. The political parties and their leadership dominate the entire political spectrum and have a final and defining saying in shaping the state's public policy, including its foreign policy. The source of political power for the elite in Serbia is derived from their membership or control over a political party that is in power at a particular moment. However, more importantly, within NCR it is a constraining factor in Serbian foreign policy behaviour. It mediates and distorts international systemic pressures, making political parties a logical choice for the intervening variable.

Nicholas Kitchen's study is very illustrative of the need to select a critical intervening variable. Kitchen treats ideas as the intervening variable because in his words "prevailing ideas influence the type of foreign policy response to structural imperatives."<sup>217</sup> For Kitchen ideas are the intervening variable because ideas are portrayed as present within

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<sup>217</sup> Nicholas Kitchen, 'Systemic pressures and domestic ideas', p.132

a whole set of different channels, including individual policymakers' personalities, cultural preferences of a given society, and political institutions.<sup>218</sup> To modify Kitchen's logic, if ideas can be selected as an intervening variable because of their presence in various channels, one can also use party politics in Serbia: whatever other unit-level factors are at play, they are being filtered and framed within the broader mechanism of party politics. Whatever perceptions individual leaders might have on the systemic environment, they are being adapted for the political parties and elites' competition. Public opinion is also one of the guidelines in that same competition. Therefore, party politics is chosen as the intervening variable because all other unit-level factors are filtered through it. Moreover, it is an umbrella term that encompasses this wide range of domestic factors in play, affecting the country's foreign policy behaviour. Before we analyse party politics as the intervening variable, we need to briefly consider the other two unit-level factors at play: perceptions and public opinion.

### 4.3 Perceptions

Perceptions are frequently seen as an essential element in the study of foreign policy.<sup>219</sup> That is to say, the way political leaders, strategists and policymakers perceive the country's systemic environment affects the policy they adopt, the moment they decide on a particular policy and the instruments they chose to utilise. Many realist scholars used perceptions within their paradigm, with Stephen Walt being one of the more prominent examples.<sup>220</sup>

As a theory engaged with the art of statesmanship, classical realism emphasised the role of a leader's perception. These ideas are present in the works of thinkers and writers like Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Walter Lippmann.<sup>221</sup> Kenneth Waltz also briefly touched on how systemic constraints are perceived, but noted that the idea

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<sup>218</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.70

<sup>219</sup> Richard Herrmann, 'The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders?', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, No. 4, November 1986, p. 841

<sup>220</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: 1987)

<sup>221</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, NJ: 1988), pp.9-10



belongs much more to the domain of a unit level theory of foreign policy. “The clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on international constraints but also on the characteristics of states. How will a particular state react? To answer that question, we need not only a theory of the market, so to speak, but also a theory about the firms that compose it”, Waltz noted.<sup>222</sup> Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory stands as a bridge between Waltz’s neorealism and NCR by stating that alliances are formed based on threat perception. Walt notes that the presence of perceptions and motivations as equally impacts the alliance formation process as do the contextual factors.<sup>223</sup>

NCR has been known to put special emphasis on perceptions as an important factor in their causal logic. Famous cases of perceptions being utilised within NCR scholarship are works by Aaron Friedberg on the British perception of its power decline relative to its great power rivals at the end of the 19th century, and by William Wohlforth on Soviet and American perceptions of the balance of power during the Cold War. Wohlforth described very well the validity of including perceptions in the study of foreign policy: “If power influences the course of international politics, it must do so largely through the perceptions of the people who make decisions on behalf of states.”<sup>224</sup> Wohlforth accurately stated: “Some leaderships will overestimate their power, others will underestimate it.”<sup>225</sup>

By including perceptions, NCR occupies the middle ground between neorealism and social constructivism. It reconciles the neorealist logic about the direct impact of systemic structure on a unit’s behaviour and the constructivist idea that structure is socially ordained, by acknowledging that while there is an objective reality of power relations, states do not necessarily have a clear grasp of that reality.<sup>226</sup> Shifts in the balance of power do happen, but they do not impact the state’s immediate behaviour until they are

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<sup>222</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p.122

<sup>223</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p.12

<sup>224</sup> William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: 1993), p.2

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6

<sup>226</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, pp.152-153

perceived.<sup>227</sup> Frequently, leaders' understanding of their country's strategic environment differs from an objective reality leading to the adoption of the wrong policies, as the international system operates and affects the units irrespective of the perception of power balance.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, even if political leadership accurately perceives and assesses the systemic environment, this does not mean that adequate policies will be adopted in response, which proves the limits of rationality presumption.<sup>229</sup>

The notion of perception touches upon the idea of how limited human rationality is, as frequently perceptions are developed as a result of an individual's limits in processing complex information, from the use of simplified rules or from the propensity to draw the wrong lessons from historical experiences.<sup>230</sup> Drawing lessons from history to understand contemporary policy challenges is a well-documented phenomenon where historical analogies act as mental shortcuts.<sup>231</sup> If we logically presume the limits of human rationality, Serbian policymakers are no exception. Based on the rhetoric they use when discussing foreign policy issues and international affairs, one can see that there is no incredibly sophisticated analysis of Serbia's strategic environment. Moreover, Serbian leadership frequently invokes historical analogies to explain Serbian foreign policy behaviour and account for their overly simplified perception of the international system.

In Serbia, the Cold War analogies and the invocation of the non-aligned legacy of Tito's Yugoslavia are compelling for the country's leadership. One can see that from the vocabulary of a man who personifies this logic, the former foreign minister (2014-2020) and current parliamentary speaker Ivica Dačić: "We need to be smart, to try to have as many allies as possible, without losing a single friend. Serbia cannot be strong without them. If Tito could do it, why couldn't we?"<sup>232</sup> This notion of Serbia being in the middle of the new Cold War also corresponds with what has been called "a complex of the

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<sup>227</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, p.6

<sup>228</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p.19

<sup>229</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp.22-23

<sup>230</sup> William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance*, p. 23

<sup>231</sup> Alex Mintz, and Karl DeRouen Jr., *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge: 2010), pp.103-114

<sup>232</sup> 'Dačić: Ako je mogao Tito, zašto ne bismo mogli i mi (Dačić: If Tito Could Do It, Why Couldn't We)', *Blic*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/dacic-ako-je-mogao-tito-zasto-ne-bismo-mogli-i-mi/t09dklp>, accessed 02-03-2021

1990s”, a trauma that Serbia will be isolated without allies as it has been during the 1990s, creating a need for nurturing, even contradictory ties, with numerous great powers at once.<sup>233</sup>

However, the notion of the new Cold War is very far off from the present geopolitical and historical realities of both the Balkans and the global international system, and the same goes for some other historical motives, like the one of Tsarist Russia.<sup>234</sup> By invoking Cold War analogies, the Serbian leadership exercises what is known as cognitive consistency, which is “the strong tendency for people to see what they expect to see and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing image”, leading it to “fit incoming information into pre-existing beliefs and to perceive what they expect to be there.”<sup>235</sup>

The notion of multipolarity is deeply ingrained in how Serbian political elites perceive Serbia’s strategic environment irrespective of ideological differences between political parties or the difference in personalities of the ruling party leaders in different periods. For Boris Tadić and his pro-Western Democratic Party (DS) that was in government between 2008 and 2012, the notion of multipolarity was rekindled by the global financial crisis of 2008. The financial crisis instilled a belief in the EU’s weakness and the necessity to establish partnerships with non-Western powers deemed rising powers, including Russia.<sup>236</sup>

This perception of multipolarity in 2008 was also ignited by other significant geopolitical events and crises, like the Russia-Georgian War of 2008. After 2012, this perception of a multipolar international system has been maintained by all other major geopolitical events like the Ukraine Crisis, Russian intervention in Syria, and the EU’s perceived inability to handle the Eurozone and refugee crises, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump. While the geopolitical and power realities are naturally more complicated than generally

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<sup>233</sup> Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović ‘Strategic Partnerships of Republic of Serbia’, p.301

<sup>234</sup> Nikola Burazer, ‘Bechev: Russia is playing the “spoiler” in Western Balkans’, *European Western Balkans*, 28 November 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/28/ewb-interview-bechev-russia-playing-spoiler-western-balkans/>, accessed 04-09-2018

<sup>235</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton, NJ: 2017), pp.117, 143

<sup>236</sup> Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović, ‘Strategic Partnerships of Republic of Serbia’, p.310

perceived by Serbian leadership, these crises and events play a part in keeping the idea of multipolarity alive among Serbian elites. Robert Jervis's observation that "in politics, sudden events influence images more than do slow development", is truly vindicated.<sup>237</sup>

The former member of Tadić's foreign policy team, also said that there was a perception of the shift in the balance of power and the emergence of multipolarity: "That was simply something that was maturing as an understanding, and not just in our minds. That was so obvious. We really would have had to be retarded not to have observed that. ... In any case, we knew what the realities of the world were. We saw that the world was going towards multipolarity, and accordingly, we were developing our bilateral ties with China and Russia."<sup>238</sup> One should not take these statements at face value as a more critical view of this perception was provided: "It is the consequence of the unipolarity of the 1990s and great pressure exercised on Serbia in the 1990s by the US. Any information, or semi-information, a glimpse that points to the decline of the US global influence, is perceived here as the great success of the other side or finding a solution, a simpler solution, to Serbian problems through the declining influence of the US. So, this should be viewed through that prism and not through the prism of what happened. Something did happen, but not to the extent as implied by the perception. Wishful thinking, but the perception of foreign policy elites does not match the circumstances affecting Serbia."<sup>239</sup>

The perception of a multipolar international system exists even with the incumbent Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who succeeded Tadić as the most powerful man in Serbian politics in 2012. In his lecture at the Faculty of Security Studies within the University of Belgrade in May 2017, Vučić offered a view of the international power structure and what he deemed the most relevant great powers. He said that: "The 21st century is not a century without conflicts and tensions. On the contrary ... Thirty years ago, you had one, absolutely dominant military, political and economic power (the US). Today, if you take all these three elements, it is still the strongest great power. ... With its economic, but also with its military and political power, the People's Republic of

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<sup>237</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p.308

<sup>238</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>239</sup> Author's interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

China dramatically catches up. With its military and political power, Russia has risen. ... For the first time ... you have something that tries to assert itself as the fourth global power. That is Europe, without Great Britain. ... Add to that the different regional powers, like Japan, India and Great Britain.”<sup>240</sup>

This speaks to the fact that the idea of an international system inhabited by numerous global and regional powers that compete among themselves is present and deeply salient in the Serbian political class. However, apart from occasional mentions in public speeches, the Serbian leadership does not appear to be engaged in a detailed assessment of global trends. Instead, they are more focused on domestic politics. The perceptions can be a source of behaviour change, but it is more an issue of rhetorical framing and justification of policy for the domestic public in the Serbian case.<sup>241</sup> The notion of a multipolar system inhabited by multiple powers and small Serbia trying to navigate these troubled geopolitical waters is much easier to sell domestically and to frame within domestic competition among the political elites and political parties.

#### **4.4 Public Opinion**

Public opinion is a significant factor in Serbian politics, as politicians within both government and opposition are trying to win its approval, and adjust the attitudes they display in domestic political competition to that effort. Naturally, this is not necessarily unique to Serbia, but it indicates a parochial domestic party scenery. In the foreign policy domain, the political parties avoid implementing unpopular measures, like following the EU's lead in introducing sanctions against Russia. One can say that what has been called “the logic of political survival” is very present in Serbian political elites' sensitivity to

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<sup>240</sup>Predavanje Predsednika Aleksandra Vučića na Fakultetu Bezbednosti “Globalni izazovi kao pretnja regionalnoj bezbednosti” (Lecture of President Aleksandar Vučić at the Faculty of Security Studies “Global Challenges as a Threat to Regional Security”), *Faculty of Security Studies - University of Belgrade*, 22 May 2017, [https://www.fb.bg.ac.rs/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4027&Itemid=258](https://www.fb.bg.ac.rs/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4027&Itemid=258), accessed 30-08-2017

<sup>241</sup> Author's interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

public opinion.<sup>242</sup> The fact that Serbia does not have a clearly defined long term foreign policy strategy is frequently reflected in confusing public opinion attitudes.<sup>243</sup>

Classical realism acknowledged the role of public opinion in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy. E.H. Carr cited power over opinion as one of three elements of power, alongside economic and military power.<sup>244</sup> Hans Morgenthau spoke of national morale as being “the degree of determination with which a nation supports the foreign policies of its government in peace or war”, expressed in the form of public opinion.<sup>245</sup> For Henry Kissinger: “The acid test of a policy ... is its ability to obtain domestic support.”<sup>246</sup> For neorealists, public opinion is not part of the equation, as a states’ behaviour is driven by the international system, not by unit-level factors like public opinion.

For NCR theorists like Thomas Christensen, public opinion is a unit-level factor that has a distorting effect on systemic pressures, as the general public has limited access to information on international affairs and consequently limited rationality compared to the leadership.<sup>247</sup> One NCR analysis of classical realist scholarship indicates that one of the main reasons that balance of power geopolitics operated so efficiently in the 19th century was that almost all of the states were monarchies insulated from public opinion pressures.<sup>248</sup> Colin Dueck briefly mentioned, in the US context, the ability of public opinion to limit executive control over foreign policy, but stressed that these limitations are “broad and elastic.”<sup>249</sup> Alex Edwards went so far as to claim that public opinion is “a viable candidate” to be an intervening variable within the NCR tradition.<sup>250</sup> NCR scholarship is aware that many leaders will favour short term gains over long term ones

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<sup>242</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA, London: 2003)

<sup>243</sup> Mladen Mladenov, ‘An Orpheus Syndrome?’, p.166-167

<sup>244</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Politics* (Basingstoke: 2001), pp.120-134

<sup>245</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp.100-104

<sup>246</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822* (Boston: 1957), p. 326

<sup>247</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p.17-18

<sup>248</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘State Building for Future Wars’, p. 474

<sup>249</sup> Colin Dueck, ‘Neoclassical Realism and the national interest: presidents, domestic politics and major military interventions’, p.147

<sup>250</sup> Alex Edwards, *A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of American ‘Dual Containment’ Policy in the Persian Gulf: 1991- 2001*, PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics, January 2013, p.49

due to their need to stay in power.<sup>251</sup> Leaders frequently fail to act in accordance with systemic logic when their preferences are directed towards domestic concerns over international ones, and when domestic costs are too high.<sup>252</sup>

For the Serbian elite, the domestic price of alienating Russia might be too high given the pro-Russian sentiments in Serbian public opinion. Russian President Vladimir Putin remains the most popular foreign leader in Serbia and 40 per cent of the Serbs in public opinion polls view Russia as Serbia's greatest friend.<sup>253</sup> Consequently, Serbian power holders have been conducting their balancing act to avoid alienating pro-Russian constituents.<sup>254</sup> As a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia stated in an interview with the author: "One of the main reasons why Russia is influential is because it is so popular in public opinion. The whole thing started with President Tadić in 2008. He conducted a public opinion survey among his constituents. He found that one half of his voters favoured the EU over Russia. The second half favoured Russia over the EU. So, he had to find a way to unify all these votes. Most politicians shape their policies based on public opinion polls. They are not strategists: most do not think further than one month ahead. Few amongst them think three months in advance."<sup>255</sup>

According to the same interviewee, this sensitivity towards public opinion is most pronounced in Serbia's relations with NATO, as the number of those in favour of Serbian NATO membership rarely exceeds 10 per cent creating an obstacle that is difficult to overcome, even though some in the Serbian elite would be willing to entertain the possibility.<sup>256</sup> Indeed, at the end of 2020, only 3 per cent of Serbs favoured Serbia's NATO membership.<sup>257</sup> The incumbent President Vučić also highlights this issue: "If Serbia were to join NATO, it would resolve one part of its problems. It would more

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<sup>251</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p.76

<sup>252</sup> Randall L. Schweller, 'Unanswered Threats', pp.168-169

<sup>253</sup> Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic and Luka Steric, 'Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy: Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing', *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)*, November 2020, p.12

<sup>254</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Serbs Are Not "Little Russians"', accessed 08-09-2018

<sup>255</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, January 2018

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic and Luka Steric, 'Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy', p.9

quickly become a member of the family of Western people. But do not forget that Serbia would do so against 75 per cent of its population. ... Once you enter into NATO opposed to the will of your population that is an irreparable decision. And then you will leave a deep disturbance of conflict within your people in the decades ahead of us.”<sup>258</sup> This makes Serbia interesting, as Norrin Ripsman stressed, in that public opinion influences policies indirectly through legislative representatives, rather than directly influencing the executive.<sup>259</sup> As such, in Serbia the executives themselves take into account public opinion before taking policy action.

Some caveats need to be taken into account when it comes to public opinion. Firstly, for all the talk about pro-Russian sentiments, these sentiments are not the product of historical or cultural ties, but of Serbian frustration with Western policies of the 1990s and Kosovo’s independence.<sup>260</sup> As described by Nikita Bondarev, who leads research on the Balkans at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI, which is part of the Russian presidential administration): “The most ardent Russophiles I had a chance to meet in Serbia have never been in the Russian Federation, many of them don’t know the Russian language and form their judgment about Russia after the Princess Anastasia TV series. For them Russophilia is, above all a rejection of Western values and a symbol of a traditionalist and conservative system of values, and Russia is for them the personification of that notion. It is very rare to notice amongst them a true knowledge of Russia, its culture, its realities, or the processes taking place in Russia and overall of Russian people’s life.”<sup>261</sup>

Secondly, Russia has been very effective in keeping pro-Russian sentiments alive by using soft power instruments in Serbia and the Balkans, like maintaining ties with local social movements, political figures, the church and the media.<sup>262</sup> In that context, Serbian public opinion towards Russia has been high due to Russian support for Serbia on issues like Kosovo. Still, afterwards, Russia has been successful in keeping pro-Russian

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<sup>258</sup>“Lecture of President Aleksandar Vučić at the Faculty of Security Studies “*Global Challenges as a Threat to Regional Security*””, accessed 30-08-2017

<sup>259</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, ‘Neoclassical realism and domestic interest groups’, in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, p.171

<sup>260</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Serbs Are Not “Little Russians”’, accessed 08-09-2018

<sup>261</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, pp.241-242

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.225-244



sentiments high through these soft power instruments. However, it is still inaccurate to allocate Russia's influence in Serbian public opinion to Russian actions, as the local agency is more deserving of that by manipulating its relations with Russia and public opinion narratives for domestic ends. The political elites and the media are happy to project pro-Russian content to appease their constituents and divert the public's attention from other issues, like the fact that Serbia cooperates more with NATO and Western countries than it does with Russia.<sup>263</sup>

Thirdly, in December 2019 23 per cent of the Serbs falsely believed that Russia is the largest donor to Serbia since 2000.<sup>264</sup> Despite the presence of these irrational beliefs, parties that advocate either ardent pro-Western policies (membership of the EU or NATO) or a passionate pro-Russian policy of entirely severing ties with the West, are marginal players in the political arena.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, the Serbian leadership adapts its policies to public opinion pressures, but it does not take it in an irrational direction. Vučić himself admitted this: "For those who would say that 70 per cent of us [Serbs] are for joining the Russians against the West, these people do not think about where our market is, where do we export our goods to, from what will we live tomorrow, what will our economy be like."<sup>266</sup> Therefore, Serbia's public opinion plays a role, but it is not an independent causal force, nor is it the prevalent domestic factor at play. Instead, it is part of the broader framework of party politics, the real intervening variable.

#### 4.5 Party Politics

This research established that Serbian party politics is the prevalent domestic factor that acts as the intervening variable within NCR's causal mechanism. Party politics play the

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<sup>263</sup> Dragan Štavljanin, 'Bečev: Srbi vole Rusiju pre svega jer su kivni na Zapad (Bechev: Serbs love Russia because they are angry at the West)', *Radio Free Europe*, 15 January 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju-dimitar-becev/28974846.html>, accessed 09-09-2018

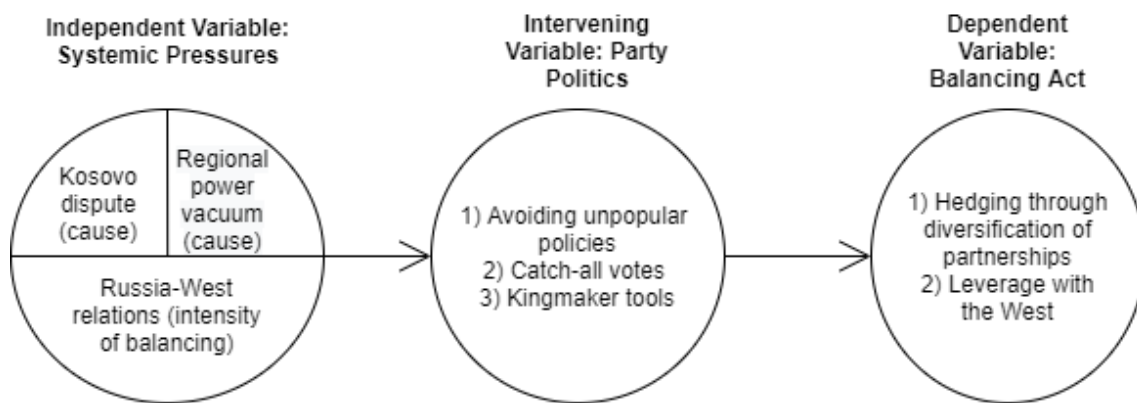
<sup>264</sup> 'European Orientation of Serbian Citizens – Public Opinion Poll (December 2019)', *Ministry of European Integration Republic of Serbia*, December 2019, p.24, [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/opinion\\_pool\\_dec\\_19.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/opinion_pool_dec_19.pdf), accessed 17-01-2020

<sup>265</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.241

<sup>266</sup> 'Lecture of President Aleksandar Vučić at the Faculty of Security Studies "Global Challenges as a Threat to Regional Security"', accessed 30-08-2017

role of intervening variable between systemic pressures and policy choices as Serbian political parties use foreign policy for their domestic ends.

**FIGURE 1 – The Causal Mechanism**



For the Serbian political parties and their leaders in the current political landscape, the balancing act between Russia and the West has three functions, showing how Serbian party politics acts as an intervening variable. The first function is the logic of political survival, where Serbian political parties and their leaders try to avoid domestically unpopular policies that would endanger their public ratings or electoral chances. Therefore, by engaging Russia, the EU, and the US, Serbian political parties try not to estrange any potential voters. The second function builds upon the previous one. By having a multidimensional foreign policy, the political parties and elites reach out for the votes of various pockets of the electorate, each with its sympathies. The third function is that parties use foreign policy to gain an edge over their competition, utilising it in the kingmaker's game. This can be done in two ways. Firstly, through foreign policy, parties and their leaders legitimise themselves by portraying themselves to the domestic public as internationally recognised political leaders. Secondly, an advantage over competition is gained by acquiring support from the relevant great powers. Both ways serve the same purpose.

Before analysing the way party politics affect foreign policy in Serbia, qualifying party politics as an intervening variable, the context of Serbian politics needs to be explained

first. Serbia is a low-income country without a developed middle class. In such a social setting, the traditional social and ideological divide between the left and the right as in more developed liberal democracies does not fully apply. Therefore, in Serbia political parties are motivated by the desire to snatch as much of the electoral votes as possible, even if that means aiming for voters who do not belong to a traditional social group that one would associate with a given party's ideological profile. While in the age of mass politics, every political party has to behave in that fashion, in Serbia, the element of political opportunism strongly outweighs the nominal ideological factor.

Consequently, to win these votes, these political parties do not send coherent messages to their constituents. In these endeavours, the political parties are also using foreign policy issues like Kosovo or relations with Moscow in the same instrumental fashion.<sup>267</sup> Therefore, political parties equally use foreign policy to drop a wide web over the electorate to gain votes from as many sides of the social and political spectrum as possible.

This process happens in a political regime with weak institutions, underdeveloped civil society, and ineffective rule of law mechanisms. The political parties reflect this reality of Serbia's political system. Serbia in the post-Milošević period has become an electoral democracy, as the government in power reflects the people's electoral will. However, it is not a sophisticated democracy. According to Freedom House, Serbia under the incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić ceased being a democracy, forcing the watchdog organisation to qualify it as a hybrid regime. This change is because Serbia marked a decline in political freedoms, civil rights, and media freedoms, and opposition and civil society organisations are faced with pressures.<sup>268</sup>

In such a political order, political parties and their leadership can dominate the political scenery, including foreign policy. Serbia is not a liberal democracy, which requires strong institutions, rule of law mechanisms, and public administration that acts as a corrective

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<sup>267</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 17 June 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82090>, accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>268</sup> Milica Stojanovic, 'Freedom House: Serbia, Montenegro, Hungary 'No Longer Democracies'', *Balkan Insight*, 6 May 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/06/freedom-house-serbia-montenegro-hungary-no-longer-democracies/>, accessed 25-01-2021

instrument towards the political parties and their leaders. For a better part of its post-Milošević history, Serbia can be described as a semi-functional or even an illiberal democracy. It is a very fertile political terrain for political parties and their leaders to assert themselves over the entire political spectrum, including the foreign policy.

Consequently, some have characterised such political order in Serbia as a “soft autocracy”, where political opposition competes with the government in formally free elections. However, the ruling party’s hold over media, judiciary, government agencies and security services give that party a decisive edge over political competitors.<sup>269</sup> A study by a team of Serbian political scientists published in 2011 portrayed the environment which several years later allowed one man to dominate the country’s politics, which is the case with the incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić. The study declares the following: “Rule of law obviously does not reside here, and informal institutions - e.g. clientelism and corruption - dominate. The executive branch of government obviously ignores constitutional limitations and dominates the parliament, judiciary, and different agencies of horizontal responsibilities, manufacturing an arbitrary and inefficient government, endangering long term chances for economic growth and democratic development.”<sup>270</sup> At the same time, this study also underlines that the opposition is frequently similar to the government, as it is also based on strong leaders, vague programs, and irresponsible, populist tendencies.<sup>271</sup> In a report authored for the US Congress by the Congressional Research Service in 2009, this reality of Serbia and Balkan countries is also pronounced: “Too often, party leaders, with their power to distribute patronage, contracts, and other sources of largesse, are the real power in these countries, overriding the rule of law.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Aleks Eror, ‘How Aleksandar Vučić Became Europe’s Favorite Autocrat’, *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/09/how-aleksandar-vucic-became-europes-favorite-autocrat/>, accessed 09-08-2018

<sup>270</sup> Nebojša Vladislavljević ‘Demokratija i polupredsednički system u Srbiji danas (Democracy and Semi-Presidential System in Serbia Today)’, in Zbornik radova: Javne Politike Srbije (Collection of Works: Public Policies of Serbia), Belgrade, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2011, p.15

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p.18

<sup>272</sup> Steven Woehrel, ‘Future of the Balkans and U.S. Policy Concerns’, *Congressional Research Service*, 13 May 2009, p.3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32136.pdf>, accessed 23-02-2017

In that political environment, political parties are the primary source of power and influence. However, most of these parties are conceptually and in terms of the actual organisation based on a predominant leader. These leaders have broad authority, dominating the internal party dynamics and processes, while at the same time, most of the Serbian constituents identify political parties with the party leaders.<sup>273</sup> Later on, upon eventual assuming of public office, these individual leaders replicate their dominance of the ruling party over the entire political spectrum. For instance, Boris Tadić, as the President of Serbia between 2008 and 2012, asserted himself as the country's most powerful individual. Tadić achieved this not based on his constitutional authority, as the Prime Minister holds a higher degree of power in Serbia. Tadić did this because he was the President of the ruling DS through which he dominated Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković, a member of his party.

As a result, most policy leaders, even the most dominant ones, operate from a party leaders' position, rather than from a position of strategically-minded statesmanship,<sup>274</sup> or even the bureaucracy-bound position of state officials.<sup>275</sup> Serbia does not fit into traditional FPA debate on whether foreign policy planning is more dominated by leaders or bureaucracy. Serbian foreign policy leaders act from a parochial party politics standpoint, based on short-term calculations in a political context, that is highly disruptive for strategic thinking and planning on foreign policy issues.

The political parties as domestic constraints have been all-too evident features throughout most of the post-Milošević period. The coalition that overthrew Milošević in 2000, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), was composed of 19 different parties; as such, it was a heterogeneous coalition of parties of different sizes, ideological profiles, and with a long history of mutual competition. After Milošević's overthrow, the glue that kept this colourful coalition together was gone, and the struggle for power and a share of the spoils

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<sup>273</sup> Slaviša Orlović, 'Parties and the party system of Serbia and European integrations', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol.10, No.2, 2008, pp.208-209

<sup>274</sup> Daniel L. Byman, Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Let Us Now Praise Great Man - Bringing the Statesman Back In', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 2001, pp. 107 -146

<sup>275</sup> Graham Allison, Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2nd Edition), (New York: 1999)

between various parties ensued.<sup>276</sup> Given the high degree of the partisan divide, it was doubtful that a country could conduct a coherent and effective foreign policy, and it is improbable that it will happen in the conceivable future. Ivo Visković, a political scientist and former Serbian ambassador stated that the Serbian party system boosted by a proportional representation electoral system creates a cruel reality of a divided society that mostly lacks the firm majority needed for a coherent foreign policy strategy.<sup>277</sup>

As political parties have personalised leadership and political leaders base their political power on their party positions, Serbian domestic politics and foreign policy was frequently marked by *dramatis personae*. The notion of *dramatis personae* refers either to the dominant leaders or the competing leaders. This competition further exacerbated the extant divides in Serbian politics that impeded the formulation of coherent foreign policies. As such, in the first years of the post-Milošević era, the policy spectrum was marked by competition between President of the DS and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and Yugoslav President and President of the DSS, Vojislav Koštunica. Later on, this clash continued between Koštunica and Tadić, in their respective roles as the PM and President of Serbia.

In the later period, the Serbian policy spectrum on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts was dominated by individual leaders, as was the case with Boris Tadić between 2008 and 2012, and since 2012 by Aleksandar Vučić, leader of the SNS, who was deputy prime-minister (2012-2014), then prime-minister (2014-2017), and since 2017 president. Serbia under Vučić in both domestic and foreign policy terms became dominated by a single man and a single party in a fashion unseen since the early 1990s, when Milošević and his party dominated. As a result, the reality of Serbian semi-functional democracy came even more to the surface than before.

In the first year of the post-Milošević period, the central line of party divisions was among those parties that were part of the Milošević's regime before 2000, like his SPS and their

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<sup>276</sup> William Montgomery, *Struggling with Democratic Transition: After the Cheering Stops: A Memoir by the Last American Ambassador to Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: 2010), p.51

<sup>277</sup> Ivo Visković, 'Determinante spoljne politike Srbije (Determinants of Foreign Policy of Serbia)' in Edita Stojić Karanović and Slobodan Janković (eds), *Elementi strategije spoljne politike Srbije* (Elements of Foreign Policy Strategy of Serbia), (Belgrade, 2008), p.21

right-wing coalition partner, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), and those who were part of the DOS coalition. The central political clash was between DOS coalition's two dominant parties, the social-democratic, pro-Western DS and conservative DSS. The latter was not anti-Western at first, but less enthusiastic on this matter, and tougher on issues like the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Kosovo. During that time, the SRS and SPS did not appear to be that much of a domestic threat for the ruling parties. However, in the period between 2003 and 2004, SRS, which has recuperated from the electoral debacle in the presidential elections of 2000, has also sucked in the significant part of the SPS electorate, becoming a leading force for the electorate loyal to Milošević and the previous regime.

From that moment up until Kosovo's independence in 2008, two dominant political cleavages existed. The first one related to the divide between the former DOS coalition parties, more precisely DS and DSS. The second one was between the parties of the former DOS coalition, that were usually called the democratic or civic bloc, that was associated with the EU and the West, and the SRS that led the charge on behalf of those who formed the government in the 1990s, and advocated closer ties with Russia.

These domestic political hurdles made a coherent foreign policy even more difficult for Serbia. The executive government would always face vocal outrage from the SRS on a whole set of domestic issues, including Kosovo, ICTY, the policy of joining the EU, and any cooperation with the US and NATO. This created "the nightmare of the coalition government."<sup>278</sup> The pro-Western parties faced with a powerful right-wing opposition in the form of SRS, struggled to form a coalition majority, creating another domestic constraint. Former Serbian President Boris Tadić recalled this constant problem for the pro-Western parties: "Many believe that the democratic and civic bloc had a majority in the past. It never had a majority. Even when we were winning in the elections, we were barely making a small majority. We did not have a real majority on the 5th of October [2000], and neither did we have it in 2004 and 2008."<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Dragan Đukanović, and Dragan Živojinović, 'Strategic Partnerships of Republic of Serbia', p.301

<sup>279</sup> 'Tadić: I kad smo pobeđivali imali smo većinu na jedvite jade (Tadić: Even When We Were Winning, We Barely Had Majority)', *NI*, 18 February 2017, <http://rs.n1info.com/a229004/Vesti/Vesti/Tadic-I-kad-smo-pobedjivali-imali-smo-vecinu-na-jedvite-jade.html>, accessed 20-02-2017

In that polity, party politics is a decisive conduit between the systemic pressures to which Serbia is exposed and the country's policies. This mechanism operates in three ways. Serbian political parties operate under the basic logic of political survival. That logic dictates that to win power or remain in power, the parties must avoid pursuing unpopular policies that would diminish their public standing. As other authors have implied it in the past, the domestic actors have the greatest influence on foreign policy in states where foreign policy and national security executives enjoy low structural autonomy.<sup>280</sup> If these executives have structural autonomy in regards to the society at large, the general public, and societal groups, they will act in accordance with the dictates of structural realism, but if they do not (as in case of Serbia), they "must struggle with and seek to overcome domestic opposition or bargain with opponents over the content of the policy."<sup>281</sup>

Kosovo, as the dominant issue of Serbian foreign policy, exemplifies this logic. The party divisions became more extreme with Kosovo's independence and the power that the Kosovo issue still holds in Serbian politics. A 2007 publication on the Western Balkans by the Paris-based European Union Institute for Security Studies very lucidly noted that the "continuing dominance of the Kosovo issue on the political agenda means nationalists always have a trump card over reformists."<sup>282</sup> To paraphrase and extend this, we can say that the causal and sequential logic can go in the following fashion: as long as Kosovo continues to dominate the political agenda, the nationalists will always have a trump card over any Serbian government. As long as that is the case, Serbia will be formally opposing independence. As long as Serbia continues to oppose Kosovo's independence, it will have to rely on Russia.

The issue of Kosovo and exposure to nationalist attacks is the constant reality of every Serbian government. The whole rationale is very neatly summarised in a conversation that the first US ambassador in post-Milošević Serbia had with the PM Đinđić about the nature of a Serbian electorate: "One third, he [Đinđić] said, were hopeless nationalists who had been brainwashed and were simply 'lost' for the foreseeable future. Another

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<sup>280</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, 'Neoclassical realism and domestic interest groups', p.189

<sup>281</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.71

<sup>282</sup> Milica Delevic, 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans', *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Chaillot paper No.104, July 2007, p.81



third on the other end of the spectrum were moderates, wanting a European future and real democracy to take hold in their country. ... The middle third has a combination of nationalistic tendencies combined with a desire for the benefits of closer ties to the West.”<sup>283</sup> In light of that, one can say that every Serbian government tried to win the allegiance of this one third by conducting specific policies domestically and internationally. The policy “both EU and Kosovo” associated with President Tadić and Foreign Minister Jeremić between 2008 and 2012 was an attempt to win that one-third of the electorate.<sup>284</sup>

The 2008 independence of Kosovo has created a significant change in Serbian political scenery. Kosovo’s independence angered the DSS, who hoped that by asserting itself as the central defender of Serbia’s stance on Kosovo, it would become a dominant party able to win power and form its government. That way an uneasy alliance between the DS and DSS was broken. Moreover, the DSS shifted from being part of the pro-EU political bloc to being a most vocal member of the conservative anti-EU, anti-Western club that advocated abandoning the EU membership path, strong opposition to Kosovo’s independence, and alliance with Moscow. To avoid political downfall due to Kosovo, the DS, and every government since 2008, had to oppose Kosovo’s independence, with Russia being an unavoidable ally in that task.

Russia’s growing popularity in Serbian public opinion also became a powerful determinant for a Serbian balancing act. There is an agreement among several interlocutors interviewed by the author that it is not just the vulnerability to the Kosovo issue, but also the growing popularity of Russia which forced Belgrade to recalibrate its policy towards Moscow. Russia’s increasing popularity implies that a Serbian leader might be labelled as a traitor if he or she is not cultivating a friendship with Russia.<sup>285</sup> Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, had a clear idea of the domestic benefits Serbian politicians since 2008 to this very day expect from their balancing act. For Kurjak this is: “Survival in power. To win the support of nationalist structures, the

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<sup>283</sup> William Montgomery, *Struggling with Democratic Transition*, p.93

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94

<sup>285</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

nationalist leaning voters.”<sup>286</sup> Serbian politicians fear not only the loss of power but also being declared traitors by nationalist structures, which can also endanger their lives, mainly since Tadić always had in mind the assassination of Zoran Đinđić in 2003.<sup>287</sup>

The Russian factor is even more pronounced in case of the SNS. Unlike the left-of-centre, pro-EU DS, it has an electorate which has to a great extent been transferred from its nationalist predecessor, the SRS. Thus, most of SNS constituents are mostly socially conservative, nationalistic minded, pro-Russian individuals who are not sincerely, or at least not fully dedicated emotionally, politically, and ideologically to the notions of Western modernity and Serbian EU membership. As Dragoljub Mićunović again notes: “This has no chance of succeeding because it is not on a firm foundation. The SNS electorate does not believe in a story of Europe, which their party advocates.”<sup>288</sup> As such, the SNS is using Russia to prevent the alienation of pro-Russian constituents, particularly as the SNS voters harbour pro-Russian sentiments.

As all of the political parties and their leaders are trying to remain in power and avoid angering the public, some policies are constant for most of them: anti-secessionism on Kosovo, EU membership, not joining NATO and partnership with Russia.<sup>289</sup> The anti-secessionism on Kosovo will remain the norm as long as Serbian leadership lacks a settlement acceptable internationally and domestically. On that same front is the refusal of any possibility of NATO membership. Kosovo’s independence plus the memory of NATO intervention made it impossible for any Serbian government to join NATO, leaving the country satisfied with its membership of the Partnership for Peace program. Any political party publicly advocating NATO membership would be an irrelevant political force.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Author’s interview with Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>287</sup> Author’s interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>288</sup> Nikola Joksimović, ‘Dragoljub Mićunović: Jugoslavija je bila “tamnica naroda” (Dragoljub Mićunović: Yugoslavia Was the “Dungeon of the Nations”)', *Sputnik*, 28 March 2015, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/vesti/20150328917224/>, accessed 21-02-2017

<sup>289</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>290</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

Keeping the EU option on the table as a long-term option is also a consistent element. Even though the EU no longer has the same strategic appeal as before due to the delays in enlargement and crises impacting the EU, it is too complicated and expensive to sever ties with the EU.<sup>291</sup> Given the deep connection with Europe, Serbian political parties still use Europe as a card in domestic competition.<sup>292</sup> As such, it strategically makes sense for Serbian parties, except for the few conservative right-wing ones, to at least formally insist on EU membership irrespective of how unrealistic it is at this moment.

Ultimately, Russia will continue to be deemed an important foreign policy partner for almost all political parties. The anti-EU, right-wing conservatives and nationalists will even go so far as advocating the abandonment of EU membership and favouring an open alliance with Russia. This stance is an inevitable product of the unresolved Kosovo dispute and Russian popularity in Serbia. As long as that remains the case, Serbian political parties will use Russia to score domestically, impacting the country's policies.

The second mechanism applies to the political parties' desire to continuously operate as "catch-all parties", trying to win both pro-Russian and pro-EU votes.<sup>293</sup> Instead of being forced to choose unpopular policies like alienating Russia that would harm them domestically, Serbian political parties embrace the balancing act in the hope that they can electorally win different parts of the Serbian electorate with different sympathies. By embracing the EU, Serbian politicians promote themselves as the modernising force in society while also avoiding the political downfall that would come from alienating Russia. A 2013 report by the Serbian think-tank the International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC) concludes that every political party needs to rely on the Russian factor to have a shot at winning power in Serbia. The report stresses that by abandoning political contacts with Russia, the party that would do so would allow rival parties to win over pro-Russian voters easily, and become a decisive political force in Serbia.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Author's interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>292</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (London: 2019), pp.89-90

<sup>293</sup> Author's interview with Ivan Vejvoda, a Permanent Fellow at the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences, and a past adviser to several Serbia officials, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>294</sup> Miroslav Jovanović, 'Two Russias: On The Two Dominant Discourses of Russia in the Serbian Public', in 'Monitoring Serbia Russia Relations Project, Report III' (Belgrade, 2013), *The International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC)*, p.18

This mechanism is the logical continuation of the first one. Instead of engaging in politically risky behaviour of alienating voters, parties try to manage the risks by going for the votes of various pockets of the Serbian constituency. The idea of catching both pro-Western and pro-Russian voters has been practised by both the DS and the SNS. One contact explained to the author: “At some point, the DS got surveys which demonstrated that half of their voters were for closer ties with the West, and another half for closer ties with Russia, and they realised that they have to play with that. So, you need to have policies which are inconsistent, which are daily policies rather than some strategic decisions, and that is how it works. That is how it has worked and is going to continue to work in the foreseeable future.”<sup>295</sup>

Serbia’s balancing act is conditioned with the structure of Serbian electorate and party coalitions; as pro-European parties were always in need of forming coalitions with parties who were asking for balancing between Europe and Russia, as well as between Russia and the US.<sup>296</sup> Indeed, the need to win over various factions of Serbia’s divided society remains the norm for all political parties in the country, irrespective of differences in their ideological and political profiles. Serbian political scientist Filip Ejodus explained to the author that Serbian politicians face conflicted identities and conflicted psychological emotions in Serbian society, leading them to the balancing policy. As Ejodus stated: “The political parties simply try to play along, and they try to hit the middle and catch or capture the imagination of most voters.”<sup>297</sup>

The third mechanism is when political parties use foreign policy to gain an advantage over their rivals, primarily by gaining support from great powers to win power. In Steven Lobell’s words, the foreign policy executive can act, as “kingmaker”, putting some domestic political actors in winning or losing positions.<sup>298</sup> In contrast, some political actors use foreign policy to improve bargaining positions, vis-à-vis the competing

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<sup>295</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>296</sup> Author’s interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>297</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>298</sup> Steven E. Lobell, ‘Threat assessment, the state, and foreign policy: a neoclassical realist model’, in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, p.53

political groups described by Miriam Fendius Elman.<sup>299</sup> Gaining the support of great powers to achieve an advantage over your competition has been the hallmark of Serbian party politics and foreign policy during the twelve years analysed in this study.

This practice of Serbian political parties using foreign policy to win power in their domestic competition started to take deeper root in 2008. This was evident when the incumbent Serbian President Boris Tadić and his Democratic Party (DS) achieved an electoral win over the anti-EU bloc led by then-incumbent PM Vojislav Koštunica after having signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. Simultaneously, the shift was made as the pro-EU DS needed parliamentary support from SPS to form a slim parliamentary majority. The EU and the US provided incentives for SPS to abandon its old ways and join the pro-EU club.<sup>300</sup>

This transformation by the SPS provided a pattern later on for the interim leadership of SRS, Tomislav Nikolic and Aleksandar Vučić to abandon the nationalist, anti-Western policies of their party chief Vojislav Šešelj (who was on trial at the time in the ICTY), and form their own Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The West had naturally provided legitimacy for such a type of transition believing that it will strengthen the pro-Western camp in Serbia and ameliorate the nationalist tendency in the Serbian body politic, paving the way for the SNS to rise to power. By leveraging the Radicals to abandon their nationalist policy, the West was trying to acquire “a majority shares package” in Serbian politics.<sup>301</sup> President of the SNS at the time Tomislav Nikolić publicly acknowledged his logic behind the transformation in a political talk show in 2009: “I got tired of me and my party, losing the elections because Olli Rehn (European Commissioner for Enlargement, 2004-2010) would appear two days before the elections and give the counter-candidate decisive advantage. Let us see now whether there will be that decisive advantage.”<sup>302</sup> By

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<sup>299</sup> Miriam Fendius Elman, ‘The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard’, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No.2, April 1995, p.187

<sup>300</sup> Nicholas Kravetz, *America’s Other Army: The U.S. Foreign Policy and 21st-Century Diplomacy* (Second Edition), (Washington, DC: 2015), pp.3, 76

<sup>301</sup> Nikola Joksimović, ‘Dragoljub Mićunović: Yugoslavia Was the “Dungeon of the Nations”’. accessed 24-02-2017

<sup>302</sup> ‘Nacionalni interes - u čemu se Srbi slažu? (National Interest – What Do Serbs Agree Upon?)’, *RTS*, 25 December 2009, <http://www.rts.rs/page/tv/sr/story/20/rts-1/391241/da-mozda-ne.html>, accessed 21-02-2017

changing its policy, the SNS could secure Western support and become more acceptable for the average Serbian voter, assuring its rise to power. This dynamic was pronounced during the period between 2012 and 2014.

Post-2014, under SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia transformed itself in a hybrid, illiberal regime. The increasingly illiberal politics of Serbia is extremely conducive for the balancing act. The SNS rule is a part of the broader trend in the Western Balkans. The Balkans' ruling regimes increasingly fit the description of illiberal democracy or "managed democracy" as they are referred to by former Albanian diplomat, Agim Nesho.<sup>303</sup> This transformation entails a "movement toward higher levels of authoritarianism" which "stops short of reverting to outright authoritarianism" resulting in a hybrid regime defined by Florian Bieber as competitive authoritarianism.<sup>304</sup> Even though the political environment gives a strong edge to Vučić and his party, there is still party pluralism and elections. Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS still need to have a base in the numerical majority, which means that the logic of partisanship perseveres, and continues to impact the country's foreign policy.

The trend of managed democracies results from several factors: failing transition, particularly in economics; weak political institutions; incompetent public administration; and an underdeveloped political culture. At the same time, these trends have been boosted by the fact that civic parties of liberal and social-democratic profile have in places like Serbia compromised themselves with histories of corruption and cronyism scandals, with the global crisis giving the final blow to these parties and paving the way for SNS and other similar parties.

In this landscape of managed democracies, Serbia is ruled by the leaders of political parties, some of them with baggage from the 1990s. These parties and leaders are more than willing to use elections to gain a popular mandate, but beyond that they are not ready to apply liberal policies as it will cost them their power and privileges. Instead, they try

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<sup>303</sup> Agim Nesho, 'Germany's Challenge: Ensuring Democracy in the Western Balkans', *The National Interest*, 28 August 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/germanys-challenge-ensuring-democracy-the-western-balkans-11159>, accessed 24-02-2017

<sup>304</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, pp.3-4

to break social and institutional constraints and embark on subversive policies towards the opposition, independent media and civil society.

This state of affairs has been further exacerbated by the EU and the US, as the Western institutions' full expansion in the Balkans is postponed. As such, the Western actors are sacrificing liberalisation and democratisation for the sake of stability, in Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkan countries. These actors appear to be prepared to tolerate illiberal domestic tendencies and disregard of the rule of law by SNS in Serbia as long as that government guarantees regional stability by being cooperative on issues like Kosovo or the refugee crisis. A phenomenon that some Balkan specialists call "stabilitocracy."<sup>305</sup>

As scholar Besnik Pula described very vividly and delicately: "A new generation of autocrats has been taking over the region, sometimes with the direct complicity of overzealous American policymakers and distracted EU officials. The apparent Westernisation of the region, it's now clear, has come at great cost. Both U.S. and EU policymakers have been willing to turn a blind eye to corruption, which plagues the region's governments, and have either downplayed or ignored the creeping rise of autocratic rulers. These autocrats operate under a different, savvier playbook than those of the 1990s: Internationally, they enthusiastically embrace the EU in their foreign policy. With the exception of Serbia, they express the same fervour for NATO. They are well-coached in telling Western diplomats what they want to hear, while blatantly undermining democratic principles and the rule of law at home."<sup>306</sup> The challenge is how long the EU will turn a blind eye to the illiberal domestic policies of the SNS?<sup>307</sup>

Serbia's more illiberal domestic political environment creates an incentive for its leadership to conduct the balancing act. Serbian leaders believe that maintaining an open-door policy towards Russia and pitting external great powers against each other will help

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<sup>305</sup> Florian Bieber, 'What is a stabilitocracy?', *BiEPAG Blog*, 5 May 2017, <https://biepag.eu/what-is-a-stabilitocracy/>, accessed 31-01-2021

<sup>306</sup> Besnik Pula, 'The Budding Autocrats of the Balkans', *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/15/the-budding-autocrats-of-the-balkans-serbia-macedonia-montenegro/>, accessed 25-02-2017

<sup>307</sup> Nikola Joksimović, 'Dragoljub Mićunović: Yugoslavia Was the "Dungeon of the Nations"', accessed 24-02-2017

them retain their domestic position and prevent their downfall. The reason why Serbian leaders have “not exactly thrown the Kremlin’s phone number into the trash” is to maintain leverage with the West by keeping the Russian option open.<sup>308</sup> As such, the SNS is using Russia as a factor to gain deflection vis-à-vis the EU regarding any potential future criticism by the EU of democratic backsliding at home. Party politics remains the intervening variable tampering with systemic pressures.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

Chapter 3 provided an analysis of the systemic factors impacting the Serbian balancing act. However, in explaining foreign policy behaviour, the systemic approach covers an integral part of the explanatory narrative but not the full explanation. As the NCR theoretical and methodological setting implies, it is needed to identify a domestic force (the intervening variable) that determines how an individual state, Serbia, responds to the systemic pressures affecting it. The research conducted through analysis of theoretical and empirical materials and fieldwork interviews established that Serbian party politics play this role. Chapter 4 provided an argument for this claim.

NCR has dedicated a certain amount of attention to the role of the political parties and elites through the works of Jack Snyder, Randall Schweller, and Colin Dueck. However, their scholarships relate to great powers and seasoned democracies like the US. My research fills the gap by showing the interplay between systemic pressures and party politics regarding a state with fewer power capabilities and whose rule-of-law institutions do not function effectively. As Peter Trubowitz pointed, the NCR neglected the role of conflict and competition between political parties. This research shows that party competition is where the domestic pressures distort systemic pressures.

This chapter first compared party politics with the other two conspicuous domestic factors, the policymakers’ perceptions, and public opinion. It proved that perceptions and public opinion, while far from irrelevant, could not act as the intervening variable. The perceptions are a combined product of an instinctive reaction to global trends and shallow

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<sup>308</sup> Besnik Pula, ‘The Budding Autocrats of the Balkans’, accessed 25-02-2017



historical analogies, later adjusted to the domestic narratives. Public opinion is a powerful force, being a benchmark in Serbian political parties and elites' competition. Therefore, these two elements are part of the broader fabric of Serbian party politics.

This chapter laid out the Serbian political context defined by weak civil institutions dominated by party interest and party leaders. In that environment, parties and their leaders dominate and shape public policies. The chapter outlined three ways foreign policy is used by political parties in their mutual struggle, displaying how systemic pressures are impacted by domestic forces. First, the political parties avoid unpopular policies to prevent domestic backlash, particularly regarding Kosovo and ties with Russia. Second, political parties try to win the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbs. Third, parties use foreign policy to gain an edge over their competitors, either through their leaders who legitimise themselves domestically as internationally respected statesmen, or by acquiring great power backing.

This behaviour is prevalent in Serbia irrespective of the party in power. Therefore, party politics regularly impact the systemic processes affecting Serbia. Chapter 3 identified three external conditions/processes behind the Serbian balancing act, while this chapter defined the intervening variable, the domestic element through which these systemic forces are filtered. The next three chapters will be the empirical chapters, showing how the intersection of systemic and domestic factors described in chapters 3 and 4 manifested during the different stages of recent Serbian history, shaping the Serbian balancing act. They begin with the period between 2008 and 2012, when the Serbian balancing act began.

## **CHAPTER V: THE GAME BEGINS – THE SERBIAN BALANCING ACT 2008-2012**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter covers the period from 2008 to 2012, starting with Kosovo's independence in 2008 and concluding with the DS's electoral loss in Serbia's 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. This chapter is the first of three to address the empirical elements of this study; they will empirically examine the concepts laid out in the previous theoretical and conceptual chapters.

This chapter is fundamental for this analysis because it marks the beginning of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West. In terms of causality, the systemic and domestic factors that drive the Serbian balancing act emerged during this period, and they remain in place today. This chapter analyses Serbian policy regarding the three external powers - the EU, the US, and Russia - between 2008 and 2012 by examining the systemic and domestic factors that shaped these policies as analytical benchmarks.

At a systemic level, Serbian foreign policy was affected by two realities that emerged in 2008 and which persist today. The first is the independence of Kosovo. The second is the power vacuum caused by the 2008 international financial crisis, and the subsequent inability of the EU to focus on the Balkans.<sup>309</sup> In 2008, Serbia's decisive moment was Kosovo's independence, which will be regarded as a systemic factor, as independent Kosovo was the product of key Western countries. It forced Serbia to recalibrate its foreign policy. The reason for this is simple: as counter-secession became one of the main features of Serbian foreign policy, Belgrade had to re-evaluate its relationship with the West, as the US and most EU members supported Kosovo's independence. At the same time, Russia supported the Serbian position on Kosovo. Caught between two sides, Serbia had to develop a balanced approach to Russia and the West.

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<sup>309</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon', accessed 17-11-2019

An already complex environment became even trickier as, in 2008, a power vacuum emerged in the Balkans. The EU and the US became distracted from the Balkans because of the financial crisis and a preoccupation with other regions, like the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. Russia seized the opportunity to act more assertively in regards to Serbia and the Western Balkans. For Serbia, burdened with the Kosovo dispute and left without any tangible possibility of joining the EU, balancing became the defining feature of its behaviour. This period was shaped by rising tensions between Russia and the West, particularly the US, on issues such as the coloured revolutions, missile defence, NATO expansion, and the Russo-Georgian War. Kosovo's independence became part of the same rivalry and provided Russia with an opportunity to confront the West while also asserting itself in the Balkans.

Strong domestic factors also promoted Serbia's balancing between Russia and the West in 2008: Serbian political parties began to leverage foreign policy matters like opposition to Kosovo's independence and relations with Russia, to score political points. Bitter party divisions and party competition, an integral part of Serbian politics in the years before 2008, were further exacerbated by the Kosovo issue, which began to dominate domestic politics. Nationalist parties opted to use Kosovo to achieve victory over pro-European parties, while the pro-European parties feared a popular backlash if they adopted a soft stance. Moreover, due to Russian support on Kosovo, pro-Russian sentiment in Serbian public opinion became extremely high. Serbian policy-makers had to take these new domestic realities into account when they formulated foreign policy. In that context, engaging Russia and winning over the pro-Russian constituents was a useful way for Serbian politicians to avoid domestic backlash. In that context, one can say that the national political power of the Serbian elite was disrupted as they faced more domestic hurdles, and they needed to alter their foreign policy conception in order to continue enjoying popular support.

This chapter is a case study of one stage in Serbia's foreign policy behaviour as a balancing act between Russia and the West, the period between 2008 and 2012. It will use similar methods to the rest of the study in theoretical and empirical terms, mixing process tracing and analytical narrative relying on primary – extensive interview material

– and secondary sources. The years 2008 to 2012 are a key initial stage of the foreign policy behaviour that this study explores. It allows the reader to get an empirical sense of the process and become aware of the causal systemic and domestic forces at play.

As the purpose of this study is to determine causality in the emergence of Serbia's balancing act, process tracing takes centre stage in determining systemic and domestic factors that lay behind that balancing act, putting cause and outcome in sequential order and establishing a link between independent and dependent variables. The dependent variable is Serbian foreign policy behaviour, or its balancing act between Russia and the West. The independent variable is the international systemic level: Kosovo's independence and the power vacuum are part of a systemic environment that generated the Serbian balancing act and allowed Russia to assert itself in the Balkans.

However, the domestic factors also impacted the Serbian balancing act. As such, NCR methodology and its causal mechanism imply an intervening variable operating at the unit level of analysis, affecting how systemic impulses are translated into a state's foreign policy behaviour. This intervening variable lies at the state level of analysis. This chapter will empirically establish that the variable in question is political parties and the mutual competition between them, in which-foreign policy acts as a card in domestic political games.

This chapter, and the study as a whole, is based on analytical narrative as it provides a chronological, empirical account, illustrated by sub-plots. These sub-plots are the thematic benchmarks around which the empirical account revolves. As sub-plots, this chapter describes the systemic and domestic factors that impacted Serbia's relations with the EU, the US, and Russia over this period.

## **5.2 Serbia and the European Union**

During this period, two systemic factors shaped Serbian policy towards the EU: Kosovo's independence and the power vacuum caused by the financial crisis of 2008. With the vast majority of EU member states recognising Kosovo's independence despite Serbia's

objections, and as it became increasingly clear that Serbia's hope-for EU membership was not a viable proposition, this resulted in a series of incoherent and self-defeating moves for the DS government. Domestically, the Serbian party-political scene splintered after Kosovo declared independence, while party attitudes towards the EU also started to shift in the ensuing turmoil. The domestic salience of Kosovo and Russian popularity in Serbia significantly impacted Serbian policy.

### 5.2.1 Systemic Factors

Kosovo's independence caused a rupture between the coalition government formed between the DS and the DSS, particularly over the future for Serbia's foreign policy. The DS was persistent in its stance that EU integration and Kosovo were unrelated issues and saw EU integration as essential for Serbia's future. The DSS, however, insisted not only that the two were interlinked, but insisted that Serbia should prioritise Kosovo – even at the expense of European integration.<sup>310</sup>

An example of such a clash between the two parties was Serbia's decision to recall ambassadors from countries that recognised Kosovo's independence. The DS saw the withdrawal of ambassadors as a way of signalling Belgrade's displeasure without the risk of Serbia isolating itself internationally;<sup>311</sup> a stark contrast to the DSS which wanted to sever diplomatic relations with all countries that recognised Kosovo.<sup>312</sup> Serbia's Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić, from the DS, also conveyed to the ambassadors of countries in the region that they would be declared *persona non grata* if their governments recognised Kosovo.<sup>313</sup> However, Belgrade only issued this warning to the ambassadors of smaller countries, including its regional neighbours, while leaving out the ambassadors of more

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<sup>310</sup> Uroš Živković, 'Uticaj procesa evropske integracije na spoljnu politiku Srbije: primer regionalne saradnje i dobrosusedskih odnosa (The Influence of European Integration Process on Serbian Foreign Policy: The Example of Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations)', in *Synthesis - Journal for Humanities and Social Affairs*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2012, p.117

<sup>311</sup> Mark Tran, 'Serbia threatens to recall envoys from states backing independent Kosovo', *Guardian*, 15 February 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/15/kosovo.serbia1>, accessed 25-10-2019

<sup>312</sup> 'Serbia Rejects U.N. Kosovo Plan', *CBS News*, 2 February 2007, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/serbia-rejects-un-kosovo-plan/>, accessed 25-10-2019

<sup>313</sup> Dragoljub Mićunović, *Život u nevremenu III (Life in Bad Times III)* (Belgrade: 2016), p.279

powerful countries who were the leading champions of Kosovo's independence.<sup>314</sup> Systemic realities of power relations influenced even regular diplomatic efforts.

For the DSS, the global changes of 2008 were sufficient reason for Serbia to re-examine its foreign policy. Slobodan Samardžić, then a member of the DSS and Minister for Kosovo and Metohija (Serbian name for the territory), criticised the DS, stating that 2008 was the year of “pluralisation of international relations, where the unipolar world slowly moves towards the multipolar”; where instead of making a significant shift, the DS held a “dogmatic view on a dynamic which no longer exists.”<sup>315</sup>

The DS eventually defeated the DSS in this debate, (explained in more detail in the sub-section on domestic factors), as it formed a government after the parliamentary elections. When the DS eventually prevailed after the May 2008 parliamentary elections, it tried to balance Serbian foreign policy between Kosovo and European integration. The slogan employed for electoral purposes, “both the EU and Kosovo” became a mantra for Serbia's foreign policy. The new government chose to oppose Kosovo's independence, as Koštunica wanted, but sought to do so through international engagement. By doing so, and not retreating into “embittered self-isolation,” Serbia hoped that it would undermine Kosovo's independence, forcing new negotiations over Kosovo while getting the EU to embrace Serbia strategically.<sup>316</sup>

The newly inaugurated government led by PM Mirko Cvetković tried to achieve this by giving equal weight to EU integration and the issue of Kosovo, in stark contrast to Koštunica's prioritisation of Kosovo.<sup>317</sup> In parliament, Cvetković defined “fully-fledged EU membership” as “the core interest of the Republic of Serbia” while also stressing that

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., pp.279-280

<sup>315</sup> Author's interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>316</sup> Džudi Bat, ‘Srbija pod Tadićem: suočavanje sa stratejskim izborom (Serbia under Tadić: Facing up to the Strategic Choice)’, in Wolfgang Petrič, Goran Svilanović, and Kristof Solioz (eds), *Srbija je važna: unutrašnje reforme i evropske integracije (Serbia Matters: Domestic Reforms and European Integration)* (Belgrade: 2009), pp.136-137

<sup>317</sup> Uroš Živković, ‘The Influence of European Integration Process on Serbian Foreign Policy’, p.118; ‘From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integration: Is There a Will for Strategically Orienting Serbian Foreign Policy’, *The International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC)*, 2013, p.12

Serbia “will undertake all legal and diplomatic measures so as to preserve Kosovo and Metohija as an integral part of the Republic of Serbia.”<sup>318</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond the Kosovo drama, there was a broader systemic process in play, the emergence of the Balkans power vacuum, which created a permissive environment for Serbia’s balancing act. As Vladimir Međak, a Serbian specialist on the EU affairs said: “A serious vacuum exists, and it came about with Romanian and Bulgarian entrance into the EU because the EU thought ‘The Romanians and Bulgarians are members. We drew the border on the Carpathian Mountains towards the Russians. Everything westward of that border will be resolved by itself.’ ... They thought that it was over. That Russia has rolled back, being on the other side of the Carpathians and that whatever they do in the Balkans will have no effect, as it is the EU’s sphere of interest. However, we saw that this is not the case. It is difficult to reverse things.”<sup>319</sup> The power vacuum in the region kicked in when the institutional and global financial crises of 2008 convulsed Europe. This set of crises diverted the EU’s attention away from Serbia and the Balkans; they related to the failed Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005, the difficulty in signing the Treaty of Lisbon (the Reform Treaty) in 2007, ultimately culminating in the Eurozone crisis in 2008.<sup>320</sup>

The vacuum became greater as other trends in the EU impeded its ability to integrate the Balkans: The EU, and Germany in particular, became more opposed to further enlargement after the 2004 accession of Cyprus with its unresolved territorial dispute, and the 2007 addition of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, both of who were unprepared for membership. Berlin would eventually pledge that Germany would never let in anyone “who is unprepared like Romania and Bulgaria and who has an unresolved territorial dispute like Cyprus, making Serbia the worst of both worlds.”<sup>321</sup> Simultaneously, the Eurozone crisis “induced the growth of scepticism towards the enlargement and reception

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<sup>318</sup> ‘Keynote address of Prime Minister Nominee Mirko Cvetkovic’, *The Government of Republic of Serbia*, 7 July 2008, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/46940/keynote-address-of-prime-minister-nominee-mirko-cvetkovic.php>, accessed 13-08-2019

<sup>319</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

of new members”, according to Boško Jakšić. It also caused a sort of “spasm” within the EU and its institutions.<sup>322</sup>

Despite these harsh realities, Serbian policy-makers and diplomats continued to stress EU accession as the country’s strategic priority during the next four years. In 2008, Ambassador Čedomir Radojković, then Assistant Foreign Minister, called the EU “the key partner of the Republic of Serbia.”<sup>323</sup> Meanwhile, the new Serbian government tried to repair the relationship with the EU and its member states. In July 2008 Serbia decided to return the ambassadors it had withdrawn from the EU countries that had recognised Kosovo’s independence.<sup>324</sup> Nevertheless, over this period a growing number of questions arose about the coherence of Serbian foreign policy – above all in regards to its proclaimed goal of joining the EU. In August 2009 Serbian President Boris Tadić said that Serbia had “four pillars” of its foreign policy: the EU, the US, Russia and China.<sup>325</sup>

Tadić’s terminology of pillars received much criticism for its apparent lack of priorities and unrealistic aims. Some critics were very passionate indeed: “A pillar of foreign policy is its principles, values, priorities. I have been going mad over this for years. What we need most is a priority hierarchy. In general, it is stupid to say that we need three priorities. Priority is what is first. The second cannot be a priority.”<sup>326</sup> Even one of Tadić’s former associates said that this was not “an accurate and precise definition” adding that “it would have been more accurate to say it was a 1+3 policy instead of four pillars, because this way it appears that for us the EU is the same as the other three pillars, which is untrue since we want to join the EU. As such, it is more much more than just a pillar. It is a destination.”<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Author’s interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>323</sup> Čedomir Radojković, ‘Uvod (Introduction)’, in Stojić Karanović and Janković (eds), *Elements of Foreign Policy Strategy of Serbia*, p.13

<sup>324</sup> ‘Govt. to return ambassadors’, *B92*, 24 July 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=07&dd=24&nav\\_id=52168](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=07&dd=24&nav_id=52168), accessed 25-10-2019

<sup>325</sup> ‘Tadić on Serbia’s “four pillars of diplomacy”’, *B92*, 30 August 2009, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav\\_id=61454](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454), accessed 30-11-2018

<sup>326</sup> Author’s interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>327</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019



The inherent tension between the Kosovo dispute and its European aspirations burdened Serbia. This tension came to the fore when Serbia, led by Foreign Minister Jeremić, asked for an advisory, non-binding opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of Kosovo's independence. The ICJ avoided this sensitive issue, going the safest option by deciding, in July 2010, that international law contained no "prohibition on declarations of independence."<sup>328</sup> The ICJ's advisory opinion caused different reactions. The Albanians greeted the decision, while the Serbs remained firm as the ICJ evaluated the legality of the declaration but not the legality of Kosovo's independence.<sup>329</sup>

More importantly, beyond the legal issues, a more systemic, strategic dilemma was imposed on Serbia. Jeremić quickly acted on the ICJ's opinion, by submitting his version of the new resolution to the UN General Assembly. The new version asserted that unilateral secession was not a way to solve territorial disputes as "the ICJ did not confirm a right of Kosovo Albanians to secede from Serbia", and called on the interested parties to find a solution through peaceful dialogue.<sup>330</sup> The EU declared this unacceptable, and Serbia quickly found itself pressured by the EU to support a more diluted resolution.

The countries which led the EU's efforts were Germany and the UK. In August 2010 German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle visited Belgrade. Westerwelle warned that Serbia would have to "come to terms" with the loss of Kosovo, and signalled that Serbia's EU integration would be blocked unless Serbia and the EU agree on a new resolution.<sup>331</sup> For one source, this was "a shock" for Tadić, as the message was direct and public.<sup>332</sup> A couple of days later, British Foreign Secretary William Hague visited Belgrade and, in

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<sup>328</sup> Nicole Goebel, 'International court rules that Kosovo independence is lawful', *Deutsche Welle*, 22 July 2010, <https://www.dw.com/en/international-court-rules-that-kosovo-independence-is-lawful/a-5826328>, accessed 26-10-2019

<sup>329</sup> James Ker-Lindsay, *The Foreign Policy of Counter Secession*, pp.1-2

<sup>330</sup> 'Serbia submits Kosovo draft to UN GA', *B92*, 28 July 2010, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=07&dd=28&nav\\_id=68748](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=07&dd=28&nav_id=68748), accessed 26-10-2019

<sup>331</sup> Andrew Bowen, and Holly Fox, 'Westerwelle warns Serbia on Kosovo stance', *Deutsche Welle*, 26 August 2010, <https://www.dw.com/en/westerwelle-warns-serbia-on-kosovo-stance/a-5945679-0>, accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>332</sup> Author's interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

talks with Tadić and Jeremić, warned that Serbia's relationship with the EU would be damaged if the proposed resolution was not withdrawn.<sup>333</sup>

Belgrade eventually caved in to EU pressure, withdrew Jeremić's version of the resolution, and came out in favour of the new joint resolution with the EU. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2010, the resolution made the EU the "facilitator" of dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo,<sup>334</sup> taking the dialogue out from under the auspices of the UN Security Council, where Russia had a veto right. Thus, Serbian policy met with systemic resistance from more powerful countries whose club, the EU, Serbia wanted to join.

This new dialogue format began in Brussels in March 2011 under EU mediation with the negotiators Borko Stefanović, a Serbian diplomat from the ranks of the DS, and Edita Tahiri, the deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo.<sup>335</sup> Talks continued throughout 2011 and 2012, dealing mostly with technical issues, like civil registers, telecommunications, customs stamps, and freedom of movement, without venturing into a political dialogue.<sup>336</sup> The dialogue produced some technical agreements, but nothing suggested that the two parties could reach a mutually acceptable solution, which frustrated the EU. During that period, Serbia faced difficulties in coordinating its policies with the EU. As one interviewee said: "In 2009, 2010 and 2011 Serbia very often voted in the United Nations in a different way than the European Union, taking into consideration its particular interests related to Kosovo. So, the Kosovo issue had prevented the harmonisation of Serbia's and the EU's foreign policy."<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> 'British FM favors withdrawal of resolution', *B92*, 31 August 2010, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=08&dd=31&nav\\_id=69406](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=08&dd=31&nav_id=69406), accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>334</sup> Patrick Worsnip, 'Serbia backs compromise U.N. resolution on Kosovo', *Reuters*, 10 September 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo-un/serbia-backs-compromise-u-n-resolution-on-kosovo-idUSTRE68851J20100909>, accessed 26-10-2019

<sup>335</sup> 'A Dialogue Without A Future', *Radio Free Europe*, 18 May 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo\\_serbian\\_negotiations\\_a\\_dialogue\\_without\\_a\\_future/24178408.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo_serbian_negotiations_a_dialogue_without_a_future/24178408.html), accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>336</sup> 'EU: Kosovo-Serbia Talks Off To 'Positive Start'', *Radio Free Europe*, 9 March 2011, <https://www.rferl.org/a/2333159.html>, accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>337</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

The troubles emerged in the majority Serb municipalities of North Kosovo – an area with close links to Belgrade and beyond the control of Priština. The unclear status of North Kosovo led to talks in Belgrade about Kosovo’s partition, as a potential model for resolving the Kosovo conundrum.<sup>338</sup> Encouraged by Brussels’ technical talks, in July 2011 Priština tried to establish full control over Northern Kosovo by dispatching police special forces to seize control of two border checkpoints with Serbia. The local Serbs organised resistance that resulted in violent conflict and the death of one member of the Kosovo police special force unit.<sup>339</sup>

It turned out to be a decisive moment for Tadić and his future political downfall. While the full content of bilateral talks is unknown, Merkel in her Belgrade visit in August 2011 dismissed Tadić’s insistence on Kosovo’s partition. During a press conference, Merkel stated that Serbia would not become a member of the EU without normalising relations with Kosovo, demanding that Belgrade dismantle parallel institutions in Northern Kosovo, and eliminate the idea of partition.<sup>340</sup> Some claimed that for Merkel this was a way to please anti-EU enlargement voices within the CDU, the political party she led, by issuing a demand that would be impossible for Belgrade to meet.<sup>341</sup> Merkel told Tadić clearly that on the EU and Kosovo “there are no two parallel tracks” marking the “finale and collapse” of his policy.<sup>342</sup>

Meantime, in May 2011, Serbia arrested former Bosnian Serb military leader Ratko Mladić, who was wanted by the ICTY. For years Mladić’s ‘non-arrest’ was the main obstacle to Serbia’s EU accession. Despite hopes that the accession would receive a new momentum, the Kosovo dispute and problems within the EU itself continued to block the

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<sup>338</sup> Bojana Barlovac, ‘Ghost of Partition Haunts Kosovo-Serbia Talks’, *Balkan Insight*, 18 May 2011, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/idea-of-kosovo-partition-back-in-the-air>, accessed 25-10-2019

<sup>339</sup> ‘Kosovo PM Defends Police Attempt to Seize Border Posts’, *Voice of America*, 25 July 2011, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/kosovo-pm-defends-police-attempt-seize-border-posts>, accessed 11-11-2019

<sup>340</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, ‘Germany Makes Another Balkan Mess’, *The National Interest*, 16 September 2011, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/germany-makes-another-balkan-mess-5932>, accessed 11-11-2019

<sup>341</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>342</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

country's EU path.<sup>343</sup> As Srećko Đukić said: "We have to acknowledge the decline in the EU's interest in the Western Balkans and Serbia, as Serbia finished its business with the Hague Tribunal, namely the extradition of Ratko Mladić to the ICTY in 2011. From that moment starts the declining interest of the EU in Serbia."<sup>344</sup> "A narrow time frame" between the arrest and extradition of Mladić to The Hague and Merkel's visit to Belgrade in August 2011 was the point at which the EU and Germany turned their backs on Tadić.<sup>345</sup> Once again, the smaller unit was punished by the power dynamics of the international system. The Serbian weakness became even more evident in December 2011 when it failed to achieve EU candidate status.<sup>346</sup>

By now the DS-led government was so deeply bogged down in its balancing act that it could not disentangle itself from its various clashing foreign policy priorities. The keynote speech that Prime Minister Cvetković provided in 2011 on the occasion of his government's reconstruction shows this confusion: "Full EU membership, as a historic goal, and the acquisition of candidate status as a necessary and key condition on this path, are of fundamental interest for Serbia and its citizens. ... This government formulated and implemented a state policy which, apart from its basic goal, namely EU membership, also implies the best possible relations with other powerful countries, primarily the United States, Russia and China. ... The Serbian government is determined and consistent in its stance not to recognise the independence of Kosovo-Metohija and is undertaking all available diplomatic activities to retain the province within its borders. In this sense, the government can be satisfied with the results achieved so far in limiting the number of states that have recognised the so-called independence of Kosovo."<sup>347</sup> The following month, Jeremić repeated the same set of well-known themes that revolved around

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<sup>343</sup> Ian Traynor, 'Ratko Mladic arrested: what it means for Serbia's EU membership', *Guardian*, 26 May 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/26/ratko-mladic-serbia-eu-membership>, accessed 07-11-2019

<sup>344</sup> Author's interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>345</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>346</sup> 'Deputy PM says he will not withdraw resignation', *B92*, 11 December 2011, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2011&mm=12&dd=11&nav\\_id=77735](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2011&mm=12&dd=11&nav_id=77735), accessed 17-11-2019

<sup>347</sup> 'Keynote address of Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic', *The Government of Republic of Serbia*, 7 March 2011, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/74195/keynote-address-of-prime-minister-mirko-cvetkovic.php>, accessed 14-08-2019

Kosovo, European integration and foreign policy based on four pillars in front of the Serbian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>348</sup>

Nevertheless, Tadić attempted to return the EU to the centre of Serbia's foreign policy agenda, particularly as the country approached parliamentary and presidential elections in the summer of 2012. At the 2012 ambassadorial conference, Tadić also focused on general themes of Kosovo and European integration.<sup>349</sup> The reason why his language was scaled back, and why laudatory talks and phrases like the one of "four pillars" were not part of the speech, was that the country was expecting to receive EU candidate status, and Tadić and the DS needed EU credential for the upcoming elections.<sup>350</sup>

In 2013 the International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC), a Serbian think tank, published a report that provided a critical overview of Serbian foreign policy between 2008 and 2012, particularly its relations with the EU. This report summarises three attributes which marked Serbian foreign policy during that period: a lack of clear strategy; a lack of effective decision making; and a lack of coordination with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU.<sup>351</sup> In October 2012, the EU published a strategic document entitled "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013." In this document, the EU called upon Serbia to respect "the territorial integrity of Kosovo" and, as a precondition for EU integration, called for normalisation and good neighbourly relations between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>352</sup> Tadić's foreign policy was in tatters.

Even to the end, Tadić tried to bring the issue of the EU back into focus. Despite German reservations, the EU did grant Serbia the status of an EU membership candidate with a

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<sup>348</sup> 'Twentieth Sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee', *National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia*, 5 April 2011, [http://www.parlament.rs/Twentieth\\_Sitting\\_of\\_the\\_Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Committee.7646.537.html](http://www.parlament.rs/Twentieth_Sitting_of_the_Foreign_Affairs_Committee.7646.537.html), accessed 16-08-2019; 'Is There a Will for Strategically Orienting Serbian Foreign Policy', p.17

<sup>349</sup> 'Boris Tadić - Redovna godišnja konferencija ambasadora Srbije u svetu (Boris Tadić – Regular Annual Conference of Serbian Ambassadors Serving Abroad)', Belgrade, 16 January 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3gjddvX4tY&t=2s>, accessed 16-08-2019

<sup>350</sup> 'Is There a Will for Strategically Orienting Serbian Foreign Policy', p.17

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., pp.5-6

<sup>352</sup> 'Communication from the Commission to European Parliament and Council: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013', *The European Commission*, Brussels, 10 October 2012, p.26, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0600&from=EN>, accessed 24-06-2021

promise that accession negotiations would start as soon as possible.<sup>353</sup> After 2008, the issue of membership was put on a “backburner”, resulting in “lost continuity.” However, by getting candidate status for Serbia, even without opening the negotiations chapter, Tadić managed to bring the EU back as the main issue.<sup>354</sup> Nevertheless, this did not help him to avoid electoral defeat in 2012.

### 5.2.2 Domestic Factors

In 2008 Serbian domestic politics experienced a significant watershed. With Kosovo’s independence, a new form of inter-party rivalry emerged: one where Serbian political elites and parties use foreign policy in domestic competition, providing the domestic context for Serbia’s international balancing act.

It began with the breakdown of the coalition between the DS and the DSS over Kosovo. In 2015, Dušan Spasojević, a Serbian diplomat and then member of the DS, noted that after Kosovo’s independence “Everything in Serbian politics becomes ... obsessed with this issue. We are becoming in internal politics and in foreign policy, a one-issue country.”<sup>355</sup> The Serbian political and party system became severely destabilised, with the issue of Kosovo becoming “the theme of social and political rupture.”<sup>356</sup> The fact that most EU countries recognised Kosovo’s independence, and that the DSS perceived the EU as one of the drivers of Kosovo’s independence, poisoned the DS-DSS coalition. The political divisions in Serbia grew worse as pro-EU parties came under pressure from their nationalist rivals, who were encouraged by Kosovo’s independence.<sup>357</sup>

Košunica and the DSS launched a major political gambit on 21 February 2008. On that day the DSS, alongside the SRS, organised a massive rally against Kosovo’s

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<sup>353</sup> ‘EU Offers Serbia Candidacy For Membership’, *Radio Free Europe*, 2 March 2012, [https://www.rferl.org/a/european\\_union\\_serbia\\_membership/24502015.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/european_union_serbia_membership/24502015.html), accessed 17-11-2019

<sup>354</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>355</sup> ‘Panel IV: Russian Soft Power’, *A LSEE-SEESEOX Public Event Russia in the Balkans*, 13 March (London, 2015), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_5GeTSIk08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_5GeTSIk08), accessed 04-11-2019

<sup>356</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>357</sup> Gergana Noutcheva, ‘Fake, partial and imposed compliance: the limits of EU’s normative power in the Western Balkans’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.16, No.7, 2009, pp. 1075, 1080

independence in the very heart of Belgrade. Tens of thousands of people attended. Tadić did not participate as he was on a one-day visit to Romania, and neither did his coalition partner the G17 Plus, nor the pro-Western Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).<sup>358</sup> In a speech at the rally, Koštunica took a jab at the Western countries who had chosen to recognise Kosovo: “For as long as we live – Kosovo is Serbia and our brothers in Kosovo are not alone and forgotten! While we reject ultimatums and accept friendship – Serbia is free! ... It will suffice, they say, that you Serbs accept to be humiliated. To sign your own humiliation. No one will ever win a mandate from the Serbian people to accept such an ignoble trade-off. Never, and no one!” Nikolić, on behalf of the SRS, was even more aggressive in his address: “On behalf of all the citizens of Serbia, I promise I will not rest until Kosovo and Metohija is under Serbia’s control. Hitler couldn’t take it away; these nowadays won’t be able to either. We owe it to ourselves and our children.”<sup>359</sup>

For the DSS and SRS, Kosovo’s independence, and the emotional reaction it caused among the Serbian public, was an argument to be used in domestic politics. The internal divide among Serbian political elites over Kosovo and the EU was becoming stronger and deeper, and these dividing topics became tools in domestic competition among the Serbian parties. As a result of unbridgeable differences within his government, Koštunica disbanded it, calling for new parliamentary elections in May 2008 with the justification that his government lacked a unified stance over Kosovo.<sup>360</sup> Koštunica hoped that with a platform that prioritised Kosovo, stronger ties to Russia, and the abandonment of EU integration, he would win the elections.

To keep its electorate together and to avoid a backlash from nationalists, the DS ran on a new platform during the elections. This platform was summed up in the slogan “both the EU and Kosovo”, meaning that Serbia would not give up on opposing Kosovo’s independence, while simultaneously pursuing the path to EU accession. Tadić laid out

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<sup>358</sup> ‘Massive Kosovo rally held in Belgrade’, *B92*, 21 February 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=21&nav\\_id=47869](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=21&nav_id=47869), accessed 28-10-2019

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>360</sup> Douglas Hamilton, ‘Serbs leader quits over Kosovo’, *Reuters*, 8 March 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo/serb-leader-quits-over-kosovo-idUSL0870535920080308>, accessed 27-11-2018



this position at the DS's board meeting in March 2008: "No one should think I will give up on this policy. Both the European Union and Kosovo, both Kosovo and the European Union. ... I see no logic in claims that a weakening of our economic and political capacity can defend our legitimate interests and so I continue to advocate this political option and I will never stop. That is my message to the citizens, the international community and all the participants in the country's political life."<sup>361</sup> In that same speech, Tadić took a jab at Koštunica and the DSS, as he claimed that he would "stand opposed to those decisions that lead to isolation and diminish the capacity to continue this struggle."

The DS used relations with the EU to win the elections, showing how foreign policy can be used in domestic competition by Serbian political parties. The EU supported the DS in its efforts as it wanted the pro-EU party to come out on top. To encourage the pro-EU forces, the EU signed the SAA with Serbia despite Belgrade's lack of cooperation with the ICTY, just as it had done when it started visa liberalisation talks with Serbia three days before the presidential elections of January/February 2008.<sup>362</sup> Indeed, in Luxembourg on 28 April 2008, Božidar Đelić, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister from the DS, accompanied by Tadić and then Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić, signed the SAA.<sup>363</sup> In a statement to the Serbian media Jeremić stated that the SAA implementation "will depend on the outcome of the 11 May elections in Serbia."<sup>364</sup> This message was directed at the Serbian public, trying to motivate the voters to vote for the DS by indirectly implying that the SAA's fate depended on the electoral outcome.

Another opportunity also came to promote Serbia's European future and use it as a tool in the electoral competition. It came the day after the signing of the SAA. Serbian Economy Minister Mlađan Dinkić signed a contract with Italian carmaker Fiat, stipulating that Fiat would invest 700 million euros in Serbia to build two plants in the Serbian town

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<sup>361</sup> 'Tadić insists he wants "both Kosovo and the EU"', *B92*, 2 March 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=03&dd=02&nav\\_id=48119](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=03&dd=02&nav_id=48119), accessed 12-08-2019

<sup>362</sup> Othon Anastasakis, 'The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.8, No.4, 2008, p.374

<sup>363</sup> 'Serbia, EU sign SAA in Luxembourg', *B92*, 29 April 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=04&dd=29&nav\\_id=49819](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=04&dd=29&nav_id=49819), accessed 23-08-2019

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.



Kragujevac.<sup>365</sup> The issue of the SAA and Fiat became a major instrument for the DS in their campaign. On 2 May 2008, Božidar Đelić declared the SAA to be a “historic agreement”, a “superior act of patriotism”, and said that SAA was “not merely a piece of paper, but a better future for all of Serbia’s citizens.”<sup>366</sup> Đelić made an even stronger case for the EU and his own party’s election bid as he asserted that “If the SAA were not signed, Fiat would not have signed a contract on strategic partnership worth EUR 700mn a day after.”<sup>367</sup>

Ultimately, the DS’s pro-EU stance bore fruit as the party won the May 2008 parliamentary elections, proving that foreign policy issues can be the tools of kingmakers in the domestic arena. However, the drama did not end there, as the DS won most of the votes but it did not have enough parliamentary seats to form the government. Therefore, the DS found itself in pursuit of coalition partners. A majority coalition was not possible without the SPS, the former party of Slobodan Milošević. As such, the SPS could name its price to both the DS and the DSS-SRS coalition. The SPS decided to abandon its nationalist image from the 1990s and rebrand themselves as a “new” centre-left political party invested in European integration;<sup>368</sup> it did this by forming a coalition with the DS.

The EU welcomed the new Serbian government.<sup>369</sup> The EU, therefore, condoned the SPS’s political transformation. This episode shows us how Serbia’s political reality had changed and how a nexus between foreign and domestic policies had formed in Serbia. The SPS decided on a major shift in its outlook towards the EU and consequently enabled the party to become an acceptable partner for the EU and part of the ruling coalition. The SPS from that period is an excellent example of a party that successfully used foreign policy to score domestic points.

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<sup>365</sup> Ivana Sekularac, ‘Fiat signs Serbia deal on investment and new cars’, *Reuters*, 30 April 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-fiat-serbia/fiat-signs-serbia-deal-on-investment-and-new-cars-idUSL3024334920080430>, accessed 24-08-2019

<sup>366</sup> ‘Đelić: SAA is historic agreement’, *B92*, 2 May 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=05&dd=02&nav\\_id=49913](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=05&dd=02&nav_id=49913), accessed 24-08-2019

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Dan Bilefsky, ‘Serbia approves pro-Western government’, *The New York Times*, 7 July 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/world/europe/07iht-serbia.4.14301834.html>, accessed 06-11-2019

<sup>369</sup> ‘EU Welcomes New Serbian Government’, *Balkan Insight*, 8 July 2008, <https://balkaninsight.com/2008/07/08/eu-welcomes-new-serbian-government/>, accessed 06-11-2019

The issue of Kosovo is what focused the foreign policy of the new Serbian government the most, and by extension tied Serbia to Russia, causing frictions with the EU. Vuk Jeremić, Serbian Foreign Minister, was the perfect example of that policy. He was known to be the policy-maker who vehemently opposed Kosovo's independence, symbolising the "terrible discrepancy" between what was "proclaimed during the elections" and "what was done in reality."<sup>370</sup> In the words of one interviewee: "After the elections were won on the ground of EU integration, Vuk Jeremić had his private foreign policy where for a year and a half, he does not mention the EU as a priority. Instead, he talks about Kosovo, Kosovo and more Kosovo."<sup>371</sup>

During his time as Foreign Minister, Jeremić became famous for saying that if Serbia had to choose between the EU and Kosovo, it would always choose Kosovo.<sup>372</sup> Domestic considerations played a major role in the DS-led government when it came to its Kosovo policy, impacting Serbia's relations with the EU. This impact manifested when Serbia asked for the ICJ's advisory opinion on Kosovo. By asking the ICJ for such an opinion, the Serbian government tried "to halt the number of countries recognising Kosovo and also to take the issue out of domestic politics because the government could be seen to be doing something, albeit not something that threatened violence."<sup>373</sup>

This episode demonstrated that the Serbian government was attempting to reconcile its systemic imperative of joining the EU and having a partnership with Western countries, with its domestic imperative of showing that Serbia could stand its ground on Kosovo. However, when Serbia eventually gave in to pressure from the EU to give up on the initial draft of the resolution, one can infer two insights.

Firstly, the domestic imperatives tend to clash with systemic imperatives. On that occasion, Tadić avoided being humiliated in front of his constituents as he got his mandate

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<sup>370</sup> Author's interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> 'Jeremić: I would choose Kosovo over EU', *B92*, 11 December 2010, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=12&dd=11&nav\\_id=55673](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=12&dd=11&nav_id=55673), accessed 18-11-2019

<sup>373</sup> Tim Judah, 'At Last, Good News from the Balkans', *The New York Review of Books*, 11 March 2010, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/03/11/at-last-good-news-from-the-balkans/>, accessed 16-10-2019

to pursue the EU membership only to be blocked in the EU accession publicly by the leading European countries. Second, the individual political players use the sensitive issue of Kosovo to boost their domestic credentials. In private, Jeremić told several European diplomats including several foreign ministers “that he knows that Kosovo is gone, but that it is phenomenal for his ratings for him to talk about it.”<sup>374</sup> Jeremić was seen as “running a private foreign policy” resulting in an “elegant” transfer of foreign policy duties away from Serbian Foreign Ministry onto the Presidency, leaving Jeremić to lobby in the countries of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) against recognition of Kosovo.<sup>375</sup>

During this period the DS faced criticism from the pro-Western LDP and from the DS’s minor coalition partner, the Serb Renewal Movement (SPO), for refusing to accept the reality of independent Kosovo, while also facing constant attacks from DSS and SRS that insisted on the continuous struggle against an independent Kosovo.<sup>376</sup> The DSS and SRS used every opportunity to attack the government’s policies. The opposition criticised the government for the ICJ’s decision – one which they blamed on Belgrade’s poorly formulated question to the ICJ. The DSS and Koštunica attacked the government for not filing a lawsuit against countries who disrespected Serbian sovereignty by recognising independent Kosovo.<sup>377</sup>

The dialogue moderated by the EU is another case in point. The DSS attacked the dialogue as the humiliation of Serbia, while the SRS criticised the government for taking the Kosovo dispute from under the auspices of the UN Security Council, where Serbia could count on Russian support, and placing it under the auspices of countries that recognised independent Kosovo.<sup>378</sup> These attacks were a constant reality for the DS that

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<sup>374</sup> Author’s interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>375</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>376</sup> James Ker-Lindsay, *The Foreign Policy of Counter Secession*, p.94

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.161-162

<sup>378</sup> ‘DSS i SRS: Dijalog poniženje Srbije (DSS and SRS: The Dialogue is a humiliation of Serbia)’, *B92*, 10 March 2011, [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2011&mm=3&dd=10&nav\\_id=498183&start=0](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2011&mm=3&dd=10&nav_id=498183&start=0), accessed 27-10-2019

lasted during its entire mandate, clearly showing a strong domestic impediment that shaped the country's foreign policy.

In the end, the domestic vulnerability was a constant hindrance for Tadić, the DS and the country's foreign policy, which became evident during Angela Merkel's visit to Belgrade in August 2011. The EU's most powerful country destroyed Tadić's policy of "both the EU and Kosovo" in front of the Serbian public and Tadić's constituents. For Srđan Bogosavljević, Serbian pollster, it was striking that Merkel gave her message to the Serbian government in the press conference, not behind closed doors.<sup>379</sup> By allowing domestic considerations to guide his actions, Tadić suffered a complete defeat on an international level, including on his EU policy.

### **5.3 Serbia and the United States**

During the 2008-2012 period, US-Serbia relations were shaped by Kosovo's independence, mainly as that independence was the product of US policies given the US military intervention of 1999 and US support for Kosovo's independence later on. On top of that, the fact that US attention was diverted from the Balkans as it was preoccupied with other regions, also contributed in forming the systemic environment of a power vacuum that created the space for Belgrade's balancing act. That way, the US only acts in the Balkans when it detects strategic inability of the EU to resolve regional issues. However, the power disparity also shaped US-Serbia relations - as Serbia tried to manage its relations with the US in a way that does not turn the US into a threat.

On a domestic level, party politics also played a significant role. Anti-American sentiments caused by US support for Kosovo's independence meant that Serbian politicians needed to tread carefully with the US, particularly over Kosovo; this contrasts with the fact that Serbian political parties try to secure US acquiescence to win power. However, domestic factors temper the systemic realities which caused the DS government to lose US support.

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<sup>379</sup> Author's interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

### 5.3.1 Systemic Factors

Interviewees agreed that the Kosovo dispute and the lack of strategic US interest in Serbia and the Balkans were determining factors in the relationship between the two countries. As one former member of Tadić's foreign policy team stated: "I would say that the US has never had a policy towards Serbia since 2008. The bilateral relations between Serbia and the US, in my opinion, were the consequence of American policy towards Kosovo and not of American policy towards Serbia. It never appeared to me that the US has a policy towards Serbia."<sup>380</sup>

Another interviewee said: "Essentially a power vacuum exists because the Americans are not present enough. The EU is irrelevant in that sense. ... America again is not particularly interested. So essentially yes, there is a power vacuum. It is not caused by the inability of the EU. It is caused by the smaller presence of the US."<sup>381</sup> Whether the EU or the US created the power vacuum in the Balkans remains unclear. However, there is no doubt that the absence of the US contributes to the permissive environment that enabled Russia to play a more active role in Serbia and the Balkans. This environment was fundamental to the Serbian balancing act.

As Kosovo became a sore point, relations between Serbia and the US became increasingly tense. Very soon NATO membership became a non-starter, resulting in Serbia proclaiming its military neutrality in 2007. An important factor, as Serbian policy towards NATO is frequently identified with its bilateral relations with the US. Former Serbian Ambassador to NATO, Brislav Milinković, noted that in Serbia, the relationship with the US and NATO are observed through an "an equals sign" and not through a "question mark."<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>381</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>382</sup> Brislav Milinković, 'Odnos Srbije prema evroatlantskim integracijama (Serbian Position Towards Euroatlantic Integration)', in Stojić Karanović and Janković (eds), *Elements of Foreign Policy Strategy of Serbia*, p.24

The role of the US is fundamental to the systemic reality of the power vacuum in the Balkans, which helped generate the Serbian balancing act. Even during the conflicts of the 1990s, Serbia and the Balkans were not a national security priority for Washington, while in the post-conflict period the two were even less important, as they had no strategic or economic value to the US, except when it comes to their impact on European security or on combating Islamic extremism.<sup>383</sup>

While the US's help in creating an independent Kosovo might be qualified as an ambitious geopolitical project in the Balkans, this project did not indicate a US desire to play a more assertive role in the Balkans. On the contrary, from the standpoint of US interests, helping create an independent Kosovo was part of the US decreasing its presence in the Balkans.

The US hoped to do this by bringing an end to what Washington considered to be the unfinished job of its Balkan endeavours of the 1990s and by passing the buck of primary regional stabiliser to the EU. The mood for the partial withdrawal of the US in the Balkans was already evident in 2009. The US role would decrease as the EU's role increased, leaving the US reduced to NATO, bilateral cooperation and particular assistance in solving outstanding disputes like Kosovo and Bosnia.<sup>384</sup>

After Serbia got a majority in the UN General Assembly to ask for the ICJ's advisory opinion on Kosovo's independence in October 2008, the Serbian ambassador to the US was sent back to Washington after being brought to Belgrade for a long period of consultations. This was done later than Serbian ambassadors in EU countries, most likely because the EU demanded that Serbia return its ambassadors to EU countries.<sup>385</sup> According to the academic and former Serbian ambassador to the US, Ivan Vujačić, the

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<sup>383</sup> Gordon N. Bardos, 'Malign Stars Aligned: U.S.-Serbian Relations in the 1990s, and Lessons for the Future', in Ljubinka Trgovčević (ed), 125 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between the USA and Serbia, p.189

<sup>384</sup> Steven Woehrel, 'Future of the Balkans and U.S. Policy Concerns', p.9

<sup>385</sup> Ivan Vujačić, 'Odnosi Srbije i SAD u period 2002-2012. godine – Novi početak i nasleđe prošlosti (Relations between Serbia and the USA in period between 2002 and 2012 – New beginning and the legacy of the past)', in Dragan R. Simić, and Dragan Živojinović (eds), Politika Sjedinjenih Američkih Država prema regionu Zapadnog Balkana i Republici Srbiji (Policy of the United States of America towards the region of the Western Balkans and Republic of Serbia), (Belgrade: 2015), p.213

Serbian diplomatic effort to limit the number of countries that recognised Kosovo's independence brought about a new phase in Serbia's relationship with the US. Vujačić called it "the phase of cooling and silent confrontation", which lasted from October 2008 until the ICJ's decision in summer of 2010.<sup>386</sup>

During the first term of Obama's presidency Joe Biden, the US Vice President and Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, were the leading agents of US policy towards Serbia.<sup>387</sup> The paradox and contradiction of Serbian relations with the US came to the fore on 20 May 2009, when the US Joe Biden visited Serbia. From the standpoint of US-Serbian ties, this was an important moment given that it was the first visit by a high-profile US official in years. During this visit, it became evident how Serbia tried to engage the most powerful country in the international system. Serbia tried to find a formula that would avoid bringing it into conflict-like situations with the US in light of their different stances on Kosovo.

The relations between the two were based on the formula of "agreeing to disagree", to avoid confrontation. On that occasion, Biden said: "The region cannot fully succeed without Serbia, we both acknowledged we need to find a way forward on issues that divide us ... We can agree that we disagree [over Kosovo] providing that we have reasonable expectations from one another. ... We do not expect Serbia any time soon to recognise the independence of Kosovo. That is not the precondition for our relationship or our support for Serbia to become part of the European Union."<sup>388</sup> Tadić's response was entirely in keeping with this formulation of "agreeing to disagree": "Vice President Biden and I have agreed that we now have an opportunity to establish a completely new level of communication between our two countries ... Notwithstanding our different positions on the Kosovo question, Serbia wishes for the best possible relations with the United States, as partners."<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p.213

<sup>387</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>388</sup> Adam Tammer, 'Serbia seeks new ties with U.S. during Biden visit', *Reuters*, 20 May 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-serbia-biden-idUSTRE54J1S620090520>, accessed 30-08-2019

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

As Ivan Vujačić wrote, “the usual American phrase we agree to disagree was gladly accepted to avoid open confrontation.”<sup>390</sup> Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, said: “Everybody was aware of the importance of the US, but unfortunately everybody also knew that we could not expect a friendly relationship with them. Instead, the goal was not to make an enemy of the US, while attempts to make them a friend, unfortunately, kept failing.”<sup>391</sup> Another Serbian ambassador stated: “Serbian policy towards the US was an attempt to lower that pressure, to ameliorate it, and to achieve the best possible, or at least the most comfortable, relations with the US.”<sup>392</sup>

During this period Serbia and the US focused on specific, very particular, areas of cooperation so that disagreements on Kosovo would not become problematic. In an interview with the author, Šutanovac cited military affairs as one of those areas:

“In my time Joseph Biden who was visiting Belgrade, had a bilateral meeting with me, which is a rarity for the US Vice President to meet with the defence minister of a country like Serbia. At the official meeting, Biden stated that the best part of the Serbo-American cooperation was military to military cooperation.”<sup>393</sup> One interviewee gave a more detailed description: “We tried to leave Kosovo aside and say: OK. Fine, we disagree on that, but let us try to cooperate on some other issues.”<sup>394</sup> These other issues were:

- 1) Military cooperation: This included stronger cooperation with NATO through Partnership for Peace (PfP) as Serbia accessed the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP), and Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP); Sending Serbian troops on peace operations under the auspice of the UN and then the EU;
- 2) Cooperation against organised crime: This included a partnership with the US DEA and the UK’s Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA); This partnership

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<sup>390</sup> Ivan Vujačić, ‘Relations between Serbia and the USA in period between 2002 and 2012’, p.213

<sup>391</sup> Author’s interview with Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>392</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>393</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>394</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019



resulted in successful operations in combating cocaine smuggling from Latin America into Europe;

- 3) Counter-terrorism: The element least known to the general public, which included Serbia assisting the US by using its old contacts from the days of non-Alignment.<sup>395</sup>

At the same time, this visit also shows another systemic reality of Serbian foreign policy: that the US only takes a more assertive role in the region when the second pillar of the West, the EU, fails to provide firm leadership in the Balkans. Biden's visit demonstrated this reality when the US saw EU leadership on hot regional issues like Kosovo and Bosnia as inadequate.<sup>396</sup>

Kosovo always lurked in the background, nevertheless. When the ICJ delivered its advisory opinion, the US greeted such a decision and called upon other countries to recognise independent Kosovo.<sup>397</sup> Among the US representatives who saluted this turn of events was Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department.<sup>398</sup> Several other senior US officials also made statements supportive of the ICJ ruling. Before this ruling, Biden telephoned Tadić to affirm US support for Kosovo and discuss US-Serbian relations, while US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that the ICJ “decisively supported the US view that Kosovo's break with Serbia was legal and that it is an independent state whose territory is inviolable.”<sup>399</sup>

The visit to Belgrade by Hillary Clinton in October 2010 was more optimistic in terms of atmosphere compared to Biden's in 2009. Clinton's visit also marked the start of a phase some refer to as “mild recovery and mild distancing of the US from the region,” which

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Edward P. Joseph, 'Europe's Balkan Failure', *Foreign Policy*, 14 May 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/14/europes-balkan-failure/>, accessed 17-10-2019

<sup>397</sup> 'US Urges Broader Recognition of Kosovo Following Court Ruling', *Voice of America*, 21 July 2010, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-urges-broader-recognition-kosovo-following-court-ruling>, accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>398</sup> 'Interview: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs – Telephonic Press Conference', *U.S. Department of State*, 23 July 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/145104.htm>, accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>399</sup> 'UN to give political interpretation of ruling', *B92*, 23 July 2010, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=07&dd=23&nav\\_id=68631](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=07&dd=23&nav_id=68631), accessed 27-10-2019

lasted from 2010 to 2012.<sup>400</sup> At the time the US again passed the buck to the EU as the Balkans were Europe's "backyard", as the US strived towards disengagement from Europe and the Balkans in light of all the challenges it faced elsewhere, including issues like the "reset" with Russia, the Iraq and Afghan Wars, the Arab Spring and the pivot to Asia.<sup>401</sup>

The US diplomatic mission in Belgrade reflected this reality. By 2010, Serbian officials had noticed a "significant decline" in the quality of diplomatic officials in the US embassy in Belgrade – particularly as opposed to 2008, when the US had "excellent" staff who were dealing with "crisis management."<sup>402</sup> The downgrading in US personnel's quality was accompanied in 2011 and 2012 by a decline in the American and the European financing of civil society and other pro-Western initiatives. Belgrade took both elements as symbolic of a decline in Western attention towards the Balkans.<sup>403</sup>

In that period, a major milestone was the May 2011 meeting of the heads of states of Central and South-East Europe held in Warsaw, where US President Barak Obama was an honorary guest. President Tadić did not take part in the summit as Atifete Jahjaga, the then President of Kosovo was present, missing that way a significant chance to meet with Obama.<sup>404</sup> From that moment the US renounced Tadić as a suitable partner in Belgrade. Sonja Licht commented that the Serbian hard position of not attending international and regional gatherings like the one in Warsaw was "a bad *status quo*" leading Serbia into "self-isolation."<sup>405</sup> Šutanovac in 2012 tried unsuccessfully to put the issue of US-Serbian relations back on the agenda, by suggesting that Serbia sends its troops to some high-profile peace mission, like Afghanistan, in hope that it would lead to a bilateral meeting between Serbian and the US president. As Šutanovac concluded: "That idea of mine was

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<sup>400</sup> Ivan Vujačić, 'Relations between Serbia and the USA in period between 2002 and 2012', p.213

<sup>401</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>402</sup> Author's interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>403</sup> Author's interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>404</sup> Valentina Pop, 'Serbia boycotts Obama meeting over Kosovo', *EUobserver*, 25 May 2011, <https://euobserver.com/political/32390>, accessed 26-10-2019

<sup>405</sup> Tamara Spaić, 'Stara politika o Kosovu vodi u izolaciju (Old Policy over Kosovo Leads into Isolation)', *Blic*, 25 May 2011, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/stara-politika-o-kosovu-vodi-u-izolaciju/3jc4p83>, accessed 26-10-2019; Sonja Licht was then President of the Foreign Policy Council, an advisory body at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

not approved. Sadly, it turned out that the Serbian President did not have a chance to sit with the US President at the bilateral meeting. It turned out that a prodemocratic, pro-European party, did not have a full US support.”<sup>406</sup> Evidently, the US dismissed the DS as a partner.

### 5.3.2 Domestic Factors

Serbia’s relationship with the US is in part formed by a powerful domestic party dynamic. Namely, as the US was the leading champion of Kosovo’s independence, public opinion against the US started to shift, impacting how Serbian political parties manage foreign policy and relations with the US, affecting the public opinion towards NATO as well. The independence of Kosovo alongside the memories of the 1999 NATO intervention, made NATO membership unacceptable in Serbian public opinion. Since 2007, the DSS was the leading critic of NATO, pointing to the organisation as the main culprit for Kosovo’s independence. The pro-Western DS had no choice but to readapt its policy stance towards NATO, as from that point on no party that advocated NATO membership could be a competitive force. Therefore, the DS had to base its policy towards NATO on the notion of Serbia being part of PfP but not a NATO member.

The Minister for Kosovo, Slobodan Samardžić, urged the US and NATO to refrain from “the project of creating a satellite, army barrack, state on foreign territory.”<sup>407</sup> Koštunica, on the ninth anniversary of the NATO bombing on 24 March 2008, attacked NATO and the US, calling Kosovo’s independence the direct product of NATO intervention and “selfish” Western geopolitical interests. As Koštunica said: “The illegal construction of a huge American military base, ‘Bondsteel’ and Annex 11 of the Ahtisaari plan, which establishes NATO as the supreme organ of government in Kosovo, reveal the reason why Serbia was mindlessly destroyed, and why a NATO state was declared illegally on 17 February. ... The policy of force that is used against Serbia is blind and won’t last, and just as with every other force that came to the Balkans, this one will leave too. A huge

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<sup>406</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>407</sup> Douglas Hamilton, ‘Serbs say West wants Kosovo as a “NATO state”’, *Reuters*, 15 August 2007, <https://reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo-idUSL1580306920070815>, accessed 26-11-2018

number of states and the majority of mankind have not recognised the first NATO state, and instead recognise Serbia in her true and internationally recognised borders.”<sup>408</sup>

Even without Koštunica and the DSS campaign, the US and US-led NATO were already unpopular in Serbia. As of December 2008, public opinion research suggested, only 28 per cent of those polled were in favour of NATO membership for Serbia, as opposed to 55 per cent against membership, and 18 per cent who declined to share their view.<sup>409</sup> Ultimately, this anti-NATO campaign was a success for the DSS, who forced the DS to vote for a parliamentary resolution in 2007 entitled “Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia.”<sup>410</sup> This resolution became the benchmark of Serbian military neutrality and its lack of interest in joining NATO.

The adoption of this resolution was a watershed for Serbia. It cemented a reality in which no politician or political party could afford domestically to advocate for Serbian membership of NATO. The fact that the US is the key power behind both NATO and Kosovo’s independence meant that every Serbian government had to manage its relations with the US carefully. The representatives of both DS and DSS gave interviews to the author explaining the logic that led to the adoption of this declaration, tracing it in Serbian history.

Dragoljub Mićunović established an emotional and historical link that Serbs have towards the concept of neutrality, as Serbia first balanced among the great European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then during the Cold War as Yugoslavia between two superpowers. As Mićunović stated: “There has always been the ideal of neutrality, and that way we will be safe. ... The NATO bombing generated negative

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<sup>408</sup> ‘Koštunica: NATO bombed to create own state’, *B92*, 24 March 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=03&dd=24&nav\\_id=48748](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=03&dd=24&nav_id=48748), accessed 27-11-2018

<sup>409</sup> Dragan Đukanović and Ivona Ladevac, ‘Prioriteti spoljnopolitičke strategije Republike Srbije (The Priorities of Foreign Policy Strategy of Republic of Serbia)’, *Međunarodni problemi*, Vol.61, No.3, 2009, p.350

<sup>410</sup> ‘Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia’, *The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia*, 26 December 2007, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/en/42050>, accessed 25-08-2019

emotional elements regarding NATO and by extension to the West in entirety. After the fall of Milošević, the country returned among other nations of the world as it was exempted, under sanctions, excluded from all international organisations, including the UN. However, the key question was NATO. It was very complicated for the country after the bombing, to decide to join NATO through a referendum. To avoid that, Koštunica, and Tadić later on, took an already-tested weapon in their hands - neutrality - to avoid entry into NATO.”<sup>411</sup>

Slobodan Samardžić noted a similar logic, despite being on the opposite side of the political aisle: “Every government takes care of the state of the spirit within the country. It is normal. It listens to the people, public opinion, its citizenry. ... Why did this bear fruit in Serbia? ... It is a reflection of the country’s position, which calculates in the following fashion: ‘If I lean 100 per cent to one side, I will experience damage from the other side.’ That is very accurate, and it is felt intuitively. It is a consequence of two simple things. The first is the geographical position between the East and the West; second is the need for independent governance of national political life, which in the Balkans is most strongly pronounced with the Serbs, and the Greeks to a certain extent.”<sup>412</sup> Serbian political parties saw the concept of neutrality and a balancing act as a way to please the emotional proclivities of Serbian voters, and remain competitive.

The frequent display of anti-Americanism in Serbian public opinion became a powerful domestic force in relations between Serbia and the US, affecting Serbian policy towards the US to this very day. As the Serbian Ambassador said: “In February 2008 the recognition of Kosovo happened, and at that point, some form of dominant and open anti-Americanism started to develop in Serbia. That type of anti-Americanism did not exist even during the days of bombing. If you look at the media, the media stance towards Americans from that period is not that type of hostility. There is not that much of a passionate hostility. In 2008, this relationship got a new dimension that was much deeper than ever before.”<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’ of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>412</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>413</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

The biggest drama involving the US presence in Serbia clearly showed how US-Serbian relations became impaired by the Kosovo situation. Right after the rally of 21 February 2008, organised by the DSS and SRS against Kosovo's independence, major riots erupted in Belgrade's centre, resulting in attacks on foreign embassies and looting of local shops. Among the attacked embassies, the US embassy was set on fire. While no US personnel were injured, one Serbian protestor died in the embassy by accident.<sup>414</sup>

During this period, for Serbian political parties' relations with the US also became part of the kingmaker game. In that context, while Serbian political parties and their leaders take into account displays of anti-American or anti-NATO sentiments, they are also aware of power relations. The Serbian political elite and their parties were aware that they must have US blessing to win power. The DSS and Koštunica attracted US hostility, particularly of the branch of the US government that was spearheading the Serbian policy, the State Department. In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs said: "The role of some of Serbia's leaders in the mob violence against our Embassy and other Embassies in Belgrade is not clear and may never be. But beyond doubt, some Serbian leaders incited the population with nationalist rhetoric, creating the environment of hostility that led directly to the attack."<sup>415</sup>

The way the US got its revenge on Koštunica, speaks again to how there is an interplay between domestic party competition and great power politics. US Ambassador Munter set his sights on Koštunica as he was "going to ensure the prime minister was gone", and that "the best revenge was making sure this guy lost the next election,"<sup>416</sup> Munter arranged for Dačić to meet Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the Spanish prime minister at the time, and George Papandreou, the future Greek prime minister, who was at the time leading the Socialist International. As Munter said: "We didn't pay him off; we just persuaded him.

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<sup>414</sup> Ellie Tzortzi, 'U.S. outrage as Serb protesters burn embassy', *Reuters*, 21 February 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia/u-s-outrage-as-serb-protesters-burn-embassy-idUSL2087155420080221>, accessed 29-10-2019

<sup>415</sup> 'Testimony of Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations "Kosovo: The Balkans' Moment of Truth?"', *U.S. Department of State Archive*, Washington, DC, 4 March 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/101722.htm>, accessed 04-11-2019

<sup>416</sup> Nicholas Kralev, *America's Other Army*, p.81

What he really wanted was international legitimacy. ... They [Zapatero and Papandreou] told him they would let him in if he joined the pro-European forces, and he did. He put a knife in Koštunica's back."<sup>417</sup> As Dačić's case shows, for a political party to win power in Belgrade, it must make sure to have the acquiescent support of both the EU and the US.

During the entire DS era, having a coherent policy towards the US was impossible for Serbia due to domestic impediments. They were particularly acute during Biden's 2009 visit to Belgrade as MPs from the SRS came up with banners to the parliament shouting: "Biden, you Nazi scum, go home."<sup>418</sup> Some would call this a minor episode, but it demonstrated the reality in place in 2009 and to this very day. That reality is that the negative connotations regarding the US, particularly on Kosovo, affect Serbia's relationship with the US, despite the clear strategic imperative for Serbia to try to improve its relations with the US.

Domestic considerations tampering with systemic imperatives turned out to be fatal for Tadić and his government's relationship with the US. This process manifested itself during Tadić's decision not to attend the summit of Eastern European countries in Warsaw with Barack Obama due to the presence of Kosovo's President Jahjaga. Tadić's associate said: "The moment Tadić refused to go to Poland and participate with Jahjaga on an equal footing, they [the US] have said: Ahem, so he does not want to resolve the Kosovo issue. ... In August 2011 right after Mladić's arrest and with our elections coming in spring 2012, absolutely no one in their right mind could expect from Tadić that he will put in motion the resolution of Kosovo's status. I mean, it is political suicide. A classical one."<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p.81

<sup>418</sup> 'Biden opens new page with Serbia', *BBC*, 20 May 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8058653.stm>, accessed 30-08-2019

<sup>419</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

The new US Ambassador in Serbia Mary Warlick appealed to Dragoljub Mićunović to change Tadić's mind, as Obama was meant to meet Tadić and not Jahjaga.<sup>420</sup> Mićunović had a vivid dialogue with Tadić on the issue:

Mićunović: "Boris, can it be that you refused an arranged meeting with Obama, as the US Ambassador just told me?"

Tadić: "You saw what noise they [the opposition] raised after I allegedly at some airport greeted Thaçi [Hashim Thaçi, Kosovo's PM]. Now, I am supposed to go to a celebration as an equal guest with Jahjaga, at the celebration of a country [Poland] that recognised Kosovo."

Mićunović: "You do not have to greet her. You will only greet the host at the entrance and then sit at the other side of the table if it matters to you. What is important here is that you will meet and talk with the US President."

Tadić: "I am not going alongside Jahjaga. We spoke. Vuk Jeremić and his cabinet. Ratković [Tadić's foreign policy adviser] and some other folks. We decided. There will be some other opportunity to meet Obama by myself."

Mićunović: "After refusing to meet the US President, there will not be another opportunity. You will be lucky if they grant you a tourist visa. ... I do not envy you for your foreign policy team and the results you will soon see."<sup>421</sup>

This was a decisive moment as the US, the world's leading power, no longer perceived Tadić and the DS as reliable partners that they could bet on in Serbia. It was clear that Tadić was acting on domestic considerations, as he wanted to avoid being labelled as a traitor by the opposition. In doing so, Tadić violated the systemic logic of power relations and missed an opportunity that his country desperately needed. As a result, Tadić was

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<sup>420</sup> Dragoljub Mićunović, *Life in Bad Times III*, p.342

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p.342-343



punished by the international system. Until the end of his time in office in 2012, Tadić was no longer deemed a reliable and acceptable interlocutor by the US.

## **5.4 Serbia and Russia**

On a systemic level, Serbo-Russian relations were shaped by Kosovo's independence and the regional power vacuum. In that geopolitical context, a Russia that had better power capabilities than in the 1990s and following its ambitions used the opening to assert itself in Serbia. Serbia, dependent on Russian support on Kosovo issue, and without a viable option of EU membership became engaged in a frequently incoherent policy of balancing among various external powers, in this case, the Western powers and Russia.

On a domestic level, party politics again played a major role. The Kosovo dispute splintered the Serbian party scenery and altered Serbian public opinion. As a result, every Serbian political party, even those who are ideologically pro-European, had to rely on Russia to oppose Kosovo's independence to avoid domestic backlash. On top of that, the rise in pro-Russian sentiment in Serbian public opinion has forced Serbian politicians to readjust their foreign policy. Balancing was a way for Serbian political leaders and their parties to win both pro-Russian and pro-Western Serbian voters.

### **5.4.1 Systemic Factors**

In 2008, Russia seized the opportunity to return to the Balkans by establishing a partnership with Serbia. Kosovo's independence and the lack of Western dedication to the Balkans were systemic factors that created a window of opportunity for Moscow. As Kosovo started to slide towards independence, Russia seized the opportunity.

By supporting the Serbian case on Kosovo, Russia found a suitable way to assert itself as a rival to the West by proclaiming itself as a defender of traditional international law based on state sovereignty, as opposed to the West who backed Kosovo's independence.<sup>422</sup> Russia applied a substantial degree of pragmatism in doing so. In

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<sup>422</sup> Gergana Noutcheva, 'Fake, partial and imposed compliance', p. 1073

January 2008, a month before Kosovo declared independence, Dmitrii Rogozin, Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO said to a Serbian journalist: "The withdrawal of our troops from Kosovo was a correct move, and I believe they must not return. We are defending not Serbia, but international law. The Serbs must defend themselves."<sup>423</sup>

As Russia was a permanent member of the UN Security Council that did not recognise Kosovo's independence, Russia became a more important factor in Serbian foreign policy than in the past.<sup>424</sup> With Kosovo's independence, Russia became a more prominent player in Serbia and the Balkans. In achieving this end, Russia had "three pillars of influence" at its disposal that it continues to utilise to this very day: membership in the Security Council; historical ties; and industry ties, most frequently manifested in the energy domain.<sup>425</sup>

More importantly, Russia was more than prepared to use its right to veto in the Security Council. Since 2007 Russia has openly threatened to veto any voting in the Security Council that implies Kosovo's independence. Dušan Spasojević said in 2015 that the Russian threat to use the veto surprised everybody, including the West and Serbia itself.<sup>426</sup> As such, the Serbian balancing act is dependent on this systemic great power behaviour.

Through the Kosovo dispute, Russia reasserted itself in the Balkans, in Europe and globally, after a period of the humiliation in the 1990s. Some seasoned observers from the US side were expecting back in 2007 that the Kosovo issue could become another divisive issue on the agenda of US-Russia relations.<sup>427</sup> As Russia continually insisted that it would not agree to any solution that is not the result of Serbo-Albanian agreement, Russia found itself in a situation where any option that led to Kosovo's independence is a humiliation for Russia.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Pavel Gelvenhauer, 'Kosova and the "Frozen" Conflicts of the Former USSR', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5, No. 33, Jamestown Foundation, 21 February 2008, <https://jamestown.org/program/kosova-and-the-frozen-conflicts-of-the-former-ussr/>, accessed 29-10-2019

<sup>424</sup> 'Is There a Will for Strategic Positioning of Serbian Foreign Policy', p.12, accessed 02-12-2018

<sup>425</sup> Dušan Reljić, 'Rusija i Zapadni Balkan (Russia and the Western Balkans)', *The International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC)*, 2009, p.6

<sup>426</sup> 'Panel IV: Russian Soft Power', accessed 04-11-2019

<sup>427</sup> 'A conversation with... Marc Grossman', accessed 04-02-2017

<sup>428</sup> Milica Delevic, 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans', pp.80-81

Maxim Samorukov provided his account: “Russia in 2008 was ready to recognise Kosovo, provided that it will be asked about it and second, given at least some hint that a similar precedent will work in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia at that time....But Russia was not consulted. The West believed it could carry on with the issue without Russian support and now for Russia, it is a matter of honour to prove that your unilateral project has failed. It does not matter if it is Kosovo, or if it is in the Balkans, or the Middle East or anywhere else. It was a blatant unilateral intervention of the West, and Russia disapproves of that and wants to prove that ‘No, you failed’, and it is far more important than Serbia or Kosovo for Russia.”<sup>429</sup>

Russia very soon upped the ante when it invoked Kosovo as a precedent in its dispute with Georgia. Russia had been for a very long time in dispute with Georgia over its two de facto breakaway provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During 2007 and 2008 the disagreement became even more heated over Georgian NATO membership aspirations. When Russia intervened against Georgia, it justified its actions on the ground of protecting its citizens living abroad similarly to NATO’s justification of intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999. When it sponsored the independence of the two provinces, it utilised the same rhetoric that the West employed to justify Kosovo’s independence that the interested state lost the right to govern the territory.<sup>430</sup>

Putin’s strategic calculus was strong from the moment Russia got involved with the Kosovo dispute. As Dimitar Bechev explained: “In the event that Kosovo remained part of Serbia, Russia would score a diplomatic victory. But should the West refuse to back down, Moscow was ready to harness the precedent and make the most of it. ... It had the best of both worlds: donning the mantle of champion of international law without tying its own hands or foregoing opportunities.”<sup>431</sup> An interviewee told the author: “When the Russians firmly decided to stand on the Serbian side on Kosovo, it was the least emotional decision ... Moscow wanted to tell Washington: You cannot do whatever you want. ... Wherever you start behaving that way, I will send you a message that I exist.”<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Author’s interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>430</sup> Didem Ekinici, ‘Russia and the Balkans After the Cold War’, *Libertas Paper*, May 2013, p.70

<sup>431</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.60

<sup>432</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

One contact believed that the logic of frozen conflict had been the main reason for Russia to become involved with Serbia: “I think that what can be the motivation is to trade with the West in terms of frozen conflicts: we will make ourselves so relevant that no frozen conflict in the Balkans will be resolved without us. So, if you want to resolve them, that is fine, but then you will have to recognise some of our other frozen conflicts that are outside of the Balkans in a way that will be beneficial for Russia.”<sup>433</sup> Dimitar Bechev had a similar view: “What Russia really cares about it is not the Balkans, it is Russia itself first of all, but also the post-Soviet space and in the mid-2000s there was a moment in Putin’s second term when we had coloured revolutions and also the prospect of NATO expansion to Ukraine and Georgia. So, that was seen as a priority, and of course, if you are Putin you want to balance, you want to push back, to counteract. The prime example being the war in Georgia, but you have other ways to assert your interest and to balance the West, and clearly the engagement in the Balkans comes in that rubric.”<sup>434</sup>

A major milestone has been the moment Gazprom Neft acquired 51 per cent of shares in Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS), the Serbian oil supply company, below what many people thought was the fair market price. The deal was negotiated in 2008 and implemented in 2009, and through this deal Russia gained a strong energy foothold in Serbia. For Dragan Šutanovac: “From that moment on, Russian influence in Serbia spreads.”<sup>435</sup> In 2008 Serbia received a Western investment in the form of Fiat and the Russian investment, in the acquisition of NIS. These two investments became “the symbols of balancing.”<sup>436</sup> In return, Russia provided a legally non-binding guarantee that the South Stream gas pipeline would go through Serbia.

Many have interpreted this as a pay-off for Russia’s support on Kosovo. Tadić, who took part in the arrangement publicly, acknowledged that it was based not solely on energy, but on political calculation as well: “One should not forget the political context, as Russia

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<sup>433</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>434</sup> Author’s interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>435</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>436</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

has advocated Serbian interests over Kosovo in the UN Security Council.”<sup>437</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, who was not yet elected as a Russian President (2008-2012) when the contract on NIS acquisition was signed, stated something similar, as he said that the deal is “in essence” “an element of moral and economic support for Serbia.”<sup>438</sup>

Not all of the interviewed observers were pleased with this transaction. A former member of G17 Plus that opposed the sale of NIS to Russia was very adamant: “We made a grave mistake as we gave our entire energy system, apart from electricity, into Russian hands, by selling NIS at a ridiculous price, through a direct bargain without a tender, without an auction, without competition and any guarantee for the construction of South Stream. Nevertheless, without guarantee, we gave our entire oil industry and oil fields in Serbia and Angola to the Russians, and now we are absolutely energy dependent on Russia and the Russian gas. ... OK, have we retrieved Kosovo? Have we defended Kosovo and did we get the South Stream? Neither one of the two.”<sup>439</sup> It is worth noting that one of the interviewees claimed that the DS expected that a Western buyer would make a bid for NIS, which never happened. That occurrence alongside the American disbelief that Russia would put a veto on Kosovo in the Security Council was considered a lack of “strategic vision by the West”, from which Russia profited.<sup>440</sup>

The new Serbian government quickly put Russia formally on the list of Serbian foreign policy priorities. In his keynote address, Mirko Cvetković stated that the desire to join the EU does not go against good relations with countries like Russia while pledging to continue cooperating with Russia on the Kosovo issue and to ratify the gas arrangement with Russia.<sup>441</sup> Tadić’s famous August 2009 statement on Russia being one of the “four pillars” of Serbian foreign policy has already been mentioned. This statement was new in a sense that it also included China. However, a couple of months earlier, in January 2009 Tadić talked about “three pillars” of Serbian foreign policy where Russia was involved.

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<sup>437</sup> ‘Tadić uveren da će Južni tok biti izgrađen (Tadić convinced that the South Stream would be built)’, *N1*, 02 December 2014, <http://rs.n1info.com/a16577/Biznis/Tadić-uveren-da-ce-Juzni-tok-biti-izgradjen.html>, accessed 27-11-2018

<sup>438</sup> Dušan Reljić, ‘Russia and the Western Balkans’, p.28

<sup>439</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>440</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>441</sup> ‘Keynote address of Prime Minister Nominee Mirko Cvetkovic’, accessed 13-08-2019

During the ambassadorial conference where Tadić met Serbian ambassadors accredited abroad in January 2009, Tadić stressed what he thought were Serbian foreign policy vectors with much self-confidence. As Tadić said: “In that context, I underscored once again that Serbia has three pillars of its foreign policy. These are the EU, Russia and the US, and without deepening the relations with the EU, Russia and the US, we cannot realise our vital national interests.”<sup>442</sup>

However, it would be misleading if the Serbian balancing act were to be reduced solely to Kosovo. There has been a systemic logic behind Serbian behaviour as explained by Tadić in 2009 when he put Russia as one of “four pillars” of Serbian foreign policy.<sup>443</sup> On that same occasion, Tadić identified the dominance of the US, the formation of the EU and its common currency, and ultimately the financial crisis of 2008 that revealed China’s trajectory to global economic leadership, as the fundamental changes of recent times. However, Russia was also mentioned within that same context, as Tadić stressed that “in the meantime, Russia renewed its economic and foreign policy potential before the world economic crisis, with high oil and natural gas prices.”<sup>444</sup>

Filip Ejodus confirmed that Serbian perception of the shift in global balance of power and the fact that relations between Russia and the West were becoming more tense played a part: “I do think that this factors in, that this is an important element because people make their choices also on the basis of the real or perceived international dynamics, and since 2008 we obviously have the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. We have the Georgian War.”<sup>445</sup> Some of the interviewed observers believed that Putin’s famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference was a particularly indicative moment, when it became evident that Russia was back on the international scene and that its relations with the West were becoming adversarial.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> ‘Tadić: Za Srbiju važni odnosi sa EU, Rusijom i SAD (Tadić: For Serbia Relations with the EU, Russia and the USA are Important)’, *RTV*, 12 January 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbHA5fqQcHc>, accessed 23-08-2019

<sup>443</sup> ‘Tadić on Serbia’s “four pillars of diplomacy”’, accessed 30-11-2018

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, accessed 30-11-2018

<sup>445</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>446</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019; Author’s interview with Ivan Vejvoda, a Permanent Fellow at the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences, and a past adviser to several Serbia officials, Belgrade, March 2019;

Based on these statements and evidence, the notion of Russia having a stronger position within the international system and that the power distribution does not put Russian in a disadvantaged position as in the 1990s also propelled the Serbian balancing act. There was a systemic option and systemic temptation that emerged in Serbian policy considerations with the recovery of Russian power capabilities under Putin.

Dimitar Bechev described this dynamic of the Kosovo issue and power shift that propelled the Serbian balancing act. As Bechev wrote: “Russia chose to push back against the West and assert the principle of territorial integrity; Serbia, for its part, rediscovered a growingly powerful ally to aid its cause. However, this has not grown into a patron-client relationship. Successive governments in Belgrade have pursued a policy of balance between Russia and the West in order to clinch the best deal either might offer.”<sup>447</sup> Jelica Kurjak said something similar: “We [Serbia], I will not say that we acted naively, but it does appear that we have tried a well-tested pattern, that it is best to be on good terms with everybody. To cooperate with everybody, to work in parallel with everybody, while at the same time keeping in mind who is more inclined towards you, and who is less inclined.”<sup>448</sup>

The new partnership became more than evident. In October 2009, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited Belgrade to meet with Tadić and the remaining Serbian leadership. The two covered a broad set of issues, but Kosovo and energy dominated the agenda, as these became the two essential issues in the relationship. Russia expressed its support on the Kosovo issue, while the two sides signed a protocol on the Serbian section of the South Stream pipeline, a gas pipeline project that is now defunct.<sup>449</sup>

The Russians also became more emboldened with their standing in Serbia, realising that with the unresolved Kosovo dispute, the lack of interest by the West, and their growing popularity in Serbian public opinion gave them significant leverage over Serbia. In April 2009, Russian Ambassador to Serbia Aleksandr Konuzin was doubtless aware of this

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<sup>447</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.55

<sup>448</sup> Author’s interview with Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>449</sup> ‘Dmitry Medvedev held talks with President of Serbia Boris Tadic’, *President of Russia*, 20 October 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5780>, accessed 31-10-2019

reality of asymmetric partnership when he stated that Russia is a strategic partner for Serbia, but not the other way around.<sup>450</sup> Russia was willing to use this leverage to push for its agenda of decoupling Serbia from Western institutions, primarily away from NATO, as earlier Konuzin had warned Serbia that it must be aware of its formal military neutrality.<sup>451</sup> During this period, the Russian side would frequently underline that it is not opposed to a Serbian policy of European integration. This stance was driven in part by a sense of realism that Serbia is more intertwined with European capitals, and the long-term Russian calculation that Serbian membership in the EU would provide Russia with an ally in the EU ranks. In a lecture that Konuzin gave at the Belgrade-based Institute for International Politics and Economics in May 2009, he stated: “Relations between Russia and Serbia on one side, and Serbia and the EU on the other side, are not an alternative ... We [Russia] have nothing against Serbia’s European perspective.”<sup>452</sup> In this same speech, Konuzin applied something of a win-win logic in describing the triangle Serbia-EU-Russia, as he emphasised that Serbia is for “maintaining the best relationship with Russia” and that “ties with old friends should not be spoiled because of new friends.”

On top of that, as Serbia felt the lack of Western interest, it became more inclined to explore if it can use the Russian card as a form of leverage with the Western players. In the capacity of Serbian Defence Minister, Dragan Šutanovac said in an interview with the French newspaper “Le Figaro”: “If the European Union does not accept us quickly, we will have to do business with the Russians. And if Europe does not open its doors to see who we really are, we will find other solutions with Russia.”<sup>453</sup> Šutanovac reflected on his interview: “With that interview I tried, and I somewhat succeeded, in turning on the alarms with our Western friends. Why did I do it? Because I was considered a man who was absolutely in favour of European and security integration. ... I said that at the time to the journalist that Serbia was firmly dedicated to European integration. ... However, I

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<sup>450</sup> Dušan Reljić, ‘Russia and the Western Balkans’, p.15

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>452</sup> ‘Konuzin: Evropska integracija važna za Srbiju (Konuzin: European Integration are Important for Serbia)’, *Večernje novosti*, 18 May 2009, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:240206-Konuzin-Evropska-integracija-važna-za-Srbiju>, accessed 14-10-2019

<sup>453</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, ‘Après la force, la Serbie privilégie la diplomatie (After Strength Serbia Favours Diplomacy)’, *Le Figaro*, 08 October 2008, <http://lefigaro.fr/international/2008/10/07/01003-20081007ARTFIG00720-apres-la-force-la-serbie-privilegie-la-diplomatie-.php>, accessed 11-02-2017



also said that Europe must have an understanding of this region.”<sup>454</sup> Russia was becoming more assertive as it sensed the vacuum caused by the lack of adequate Western and European devotion to Serbia, and Serbia finding itself on the Western periphery, started to use Russia as leverage with the West. As European integration stagnated, Serbian partnership with Russia gets stronger and so does the appeal of the Russian political model and Russia-friendly political players.<sup>455</sup> This has been a political and strategic reality which remains in place to this very day.

Russia had continuity in its policy. The ICJ’s ruling on Kosovo’s declaration of independence changed neither Russia’s stance nor its policy towards Serbia and the Balkans. When the ICJ came out with its decision, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that it will continue to oppose Kosovo’s quest for recognition internationally. Russia justified its position on the grounds that the ICJ discussed the declaration and not Kosovo’s right to international recognition.<sup>456</sup> When Serbia, in the end, agreed to transfer the responsibility for the Kosovo issue from the UN to the EU Russia was sidelined, at least when it comes to Kosovo dispute.<sup>457</sup>

Russia did score other points in Serbia. In October 2011, Ivica Dačić signed with Russian Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu in the city of Niš, Serbia, an agreement on the establishment of a humanitarian centre for emergency response in Niš, which is 100 km from the border with Kosovo.<sup>458</sup> During Medvedev’s 2009 visit to Serbia, an initial agreement on the centre’s establishment was achieved. More importantly, the centre’s establishment happened only days after the European Commission blocked Serbia’s EU accession.<sup>459</sup> However, when a journalist asked if the centre can be turned into a military installation, Dačić said that “Nobody has the right to give us lessons about whom we will

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<sup>454</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>455</sup> Dušan Reljić, ‘Russia and the Western Balkans’, p.33

<sup>456</sup> Conor Humphries, ‘Russia: ruling won’t make Kosovo independence legal’, *Reuters*, 22 July 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-serbia-kosovo-russia/russia-ruling-wont-make-kosovo-independence-legal-idUKTRE66L40O20100722>, accessed 27-10-2019

<sup>457</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, pp.63-64

<sup>458</sup> ‘Russian emergency situations minister in Serbia’, *B92*, 17 October 2011, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2011&mm=10&dd=17&nav\\_id=76895](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2011&mm=10&dd=17&nav_id=76895), accessed 30-10-2019

<sup>459</sup> ‘Russia opens ‘humanitarian’ base in Serbia’, *Euractiv*, 18 October 2011, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-opens-humanitarian-base-in-serbia/>, accessed 18-02-2020

cooperate with, this is an independent country”, while Shoigu denounced the point of a military base as “pure fabrication.”<sup>460</sup> This episode shows how Serbia uses Russia to hedge and leverage vis-à-vis the EU and the West whenever it feels its EU path is blocked, while avoiding full entanglement.

One can see how deeper the Russian footprint became. In the 2011 keynote speech by Mirko Cvetković, Russia is being put on an equal footing with US and China in terms of priority ranking, which made a significant difference compared to the 2008 keynote that listed the US as a priority.<sup>461</sup> As an illustration during his March 2012 visit to Moscow, Jeremić, in front of his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, called Russia Serbia’s closest ally and partner. During that visit, Jeremić issued a statement that demonstrated how up to that point the balancing act became an integral part of Serbian foreign policy behaviour: “There will be no changes in the Serbia-Russia relations following the achievement of the candidacy. The EU integration process was and will remain one of the priorities of the Serbian government, and Russia was and is our friend. This friendship requires no candidacy.”<sup>462</sup> The systemic foundation for Serbian policy towards Russia was set during this period, and it remains in force to this day.

#### **5.4.2 Domestic Factors**

Between 2008 and 2012-party dynamics were a powerful determinant in Serbo-Russian relations, and this reality persists even now. The party dynamics and its spillover on Serbian policy emerged from the salience of the Kosovo dispute in the Serbian domestic arena and Russia’s growing popularity in Serbian public opinion.

One could see how the Kosovo issue opened up the door for Russia during the February 2008 rally organised by the DSS and SRS. During the rally, the crowd chanted Russia powerfully and cheered at every mention of Putin’s name, particularly when Koštunica said that Serbia is not alone, and when he complimented Putin’s friendship and principled

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> ‘Is There a Will for Strategically Orienting Serbian Foreign Policy’, p.16

<sup>462</sup> ‘FM Jeremić: Russia is Serbia’s closest ally’, *B92*, 16 March 2012, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=16&nav\\_id=79292](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=16&nav_id=79292), accessed 27-11-2018

policy.<sup>463</sup> In March, a Russian state media reporter who covered the riots in Belgrade called the late Zoran Đinđić a “Western puppet”, who “deserved the bullet.” This same reporter also took Boris Tadić in his crosshairs: “This Serbia voted for Tadić, who, on a day of national mourning, had nothing better to do than travel to Romania. And after all, it is possible to come up with a thousand excuses as to why nothing is being done, but in the end, it’s all really very simple: either you stand up or are submissive and quiet.”<sup>464</sup> The Serbian Embassy in Moscow made a formal protest with Russia. However, it was evident that Russia saw that the emergence of a new Kosovo dispute alongside the rising nationalist and pro-Russian sentiment in the Serbian public gave Russia new opportunities to exercise influence in Serbia and the Balkans. From the Serbian side, it became apparent that there is both a need to rely on Russia internationally on Kosovo, and that Russia has developed strong popularity among the Serbian population, which became part of foreign policy considerations in Belgrade. One can see a strong intersection between the systemic and domestic factors at play. The Kosovo dispute is systemic, while the need to indulge pro-Russian sentiments is the domestic factor.

Ivo Visković confirmed that Serbian politicians since 2008 “are trying to please both of the two parts of public opinion, because one part of the public opinion is more inclined towards the West, primarily to the EU, less to the US, and the second one is more inclined to Russia. ... One could see at that moment that it was difficult to explain to the public that we can have an intensive policy with the West while denying that status to Russia and China. In that set of unpleasant circumstances, an attempt was made to partially show the public that we have not abandoned either Russia nor China as friends and partners.”<sup>465</sup> Another source added: “I think their knowledge of their *populus* determines them [Serbian politicians]. They are not doing it because it is their theoretical combination or because they came up with it as a solution or a concept to offer their people. They do it

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<sup>463</sup> ‘Massive Kosovo rally held in Belgrade’, accessed 28-10-2019

<sup>464</sup> ‘Scandalous Đinđić remarks on Russian TV’, B92, 23 February 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=23&nav\\_id=47912](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=23&nav_id=47912), accessed 29-10-2019

<sup>465</sup> Author’s interview with Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

because they have to. That is a feeling in the people, and that feeling various politicians handle differently, but it is the *fundus*. The one you cannot change.”<sup>466</sup>

As the Serbian political elite and the parties they represented could not afford to have soft policies on Kosovo out of fear that the electorate and opposing parties will trump them, Serbia was dependent on Russian support. Russia has used the Kosovo issue to embed itself further in Serbia’s domestic politics and foreign policy. As Dušan Spasojević recalled of that period, at the 2015 LSE event, Russia “did not exist as a factor in Serbian politics”, until the Kosovo issue became acute for Belgrade. Spasojević described that “It was the West which pushed us to Russia then” as Russia used a breakdown in Serbian relations with the West. Spasojević also noted that it was hard to explain to the Serbian public how the West imposed independent Kosovo, as the dominant view was that post-Milošević governments would receive better treatment from the West.<sup>467</sup>

The party composition of the new Serbian government also played into Russia’s hands. The DS needed Russia to oppose Kosovo’s independence. It wanted to avoid being attacked domestically by nationalists and conservatives and win votes of both pro-European and pro-Russian voters. The SPS, as a member of the ruling coalition, also helped Russia. In Mirko Cvetković’s Government, two SPS members were given high positions related to the energy sector where Russia, due to purchase of NIS, was an important factor. The first was Petar Škundrić, Minister of Energy and Mining from 2008 to 2011, and the second was Dušan Bajatović, who became the general director of Srbijagas, the state-owned natural gas provider, a position he still holds.

Dragoljub Mićunović explained an even deeper link between the SPS and Russia: “There is the SPS, always a minor coalition partner, but that constantly tries to nourish that link with Russia, and there is the fact that Russia granted asylum to the wife of the late Slobodan Milošević, and many important entrepreneurs who were on criminal prosecution lists and who found sanctuary in Russia, along with some generals, including the former defence minister Kadijević, and many others. So, the political representatives

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<sup>466</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>467</sup> ‘Panel IV: Russian Soft Power’, accessed 04-11-2019

of SPS perceived Russia as a form of haven, and they want to present themselves as Russia's main representatives, *protégés*.”<sup>468</sup> Indeed, the SPS and Ivica Dačić during the entire term of the DS government maintained “discreet parallel contacts with Moscow.”<sup>469</sup>

The Serbian government always tried to use the emotional appeal of Russia when interacting with Russian counterparts. This emotional appeal for the Serbian public was present during Medvedev's 2009 visit as it was on 20 October, a holiday dedicated to Belgrade's liberation from the Nazi occupation in World War II, and honouring of the date was on full display.<sup>470</sup> When the Kosovo dispute was moved away from UN auspice, one would have expected that Russian influence in Serbia would decrease. However, Russia still influenced Serbia, as it played on the Serbian elites who were courting Russia to boost their domestic credentials. The straightforward demonstration of this came in March 2011, when Vladimir Putin, then Russian PM came to Belgrade. The issues of the bilateral agenda were the popular topics of Kosovo and the gas pipeline project.<sup>471</sup> However, the content of the talk was not the most striking element of Putin's visit, but it was domestic, as the popularity of Russia and Putin in Serbia was on full display during this visit. While in Belgrade, Putin was awarded the highest distinction of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>472</sup>

An even more powerful image came as Putin attended a friendly football game between the Serbian club Red Star Belgrade and Zenit St Petersburg, from Putin's hometown. During the game, Red Star's fans chanted “Putin, you Serb, Serbia is with you.”<sup>473</sup> It became clear that Russia became important for the domestic public relations image of

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<sup>468</sup> Author's interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>469</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>470</sup> ‘Dmitry Medvedev and President of Serbia Boris Tadic laid a wreath at the Monument to the Liberators of Belgrade and the Monument to Soviet soldiers in the Cemetery of the Liberators of Belgrade’, *President of Russia*, 20 October 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/48775>, accessed 31-10-2019

<sup>471</sup> ‘Russia's Putin Arrives In Serbia For Talks On Pipeline, Kosovo’, *Radio Free Europe*, 23 March 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/putin\\_in\\_serbia\\_for\\_pipeline\\_talks/2347273.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/putin_in_serbia_for_pipeline_talks/2347273.html), accessed 31-10-2019

<sup>472</sup> ‘Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin awarded the Serbian Orthodox Church's highest distinction’, *Serbian Orthodox Church*, 24 March 2011, [http://spc.rs/eng/russian\\_prime\\_minister\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_awarded\\_serbian\\_orthodox\\_church%E2%80%999s\\_highest\\_distinction](http://spc.rs/eng/russian_prime_minister_vladimir_putin_awarded_serbian_orthodox_church%E2%80%999s_highest_distinction), accessed 31-10-2019

<sup>473</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.225

Serbian politicians and their parties, which affects Belgrade's relationship with Moscow. Nevertheless, this relationship was never transformed into a comprehensive partnership, as: "Tadić had a very decent, professional relationship with Putin. They had numerous meetings that were never particularly cordial, as they were not great friends, but one could see that Serbia completely normally and closely cooperates with Russia in their mutual interest."<sup>474</sup>

Dragoljub Mićunović, in his memoirs, describes one such episode, which has escaped the attention of most of the authors and interviewees consulted within this study. In 2010, a delegation from the Russian Duma visiting Belgrade insisted on meeting with Mićunović, as a chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee in the Serbian Parliament. During the talks, the Russians side insisted on hearing Mićunović's opinion on the Russian invitation to Serbia to become an associated member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Mićunović replied: "I admit, it is unclear to me, how is our security guaranteed when Serbia does not border any of the mentioned states (CSTO members). By the time help would arrive from Uzbekistan, we would be no more since we are surrounded by countries that are all in another security organisation, called NATO."<sup>475</sup>

The Russia-friendly SPS, the SRS and the DSS wanted Serbia to join the CSTO.<sup>476</sup> This initiative got blocked in the Foreign Policy Committee, led by the DS majority, despite some voices from the government in favour.<sup>477</sup> The case involving the CSTO and the instance of Dačić with Shoigu signing an agreement on the establishment of a humanitarian centre shows how Serbian elites like to court Russia both as a form of investing in the relationship with Moscow, and as a way of boosting their domestic patriotic credentials.

Serbia became so entrenched in its balancing act because Russia became a significant factor of Serbian domestic politics and domestic considerations that guided the Serbian political leadership and foreign policy elite. A good illustration came in August 2011

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<sup>474</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>475</sup> Dragoljub Mićunović, *Life in Bad Times III*, p.344

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, p.344

<sup>477</sup> Author's interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

when public opinion polls showed that 33 per cent of Serbs believed that Russia is the biggest donor of aid to Serbia, even though it was the EU, which provided 48.7 per cent of international aid to Serbia as opposed to Russia which provided less than 0.03 per cent.<sup>478</sup>

That speaks of how widely dispersed the pro-Russian emotions became within Serbian public opinion and the electorate. As a result, no political leader or party could afford to alienate pro-Russian voters out of fear they might give their votes to the opposing political parties.<sup>479</sup> It also shows that the Russian factor became a tool in internal political competitions between Serbian political elites and political parties, resulting in a powerful domestic variable contributing to the Serbian balancing act. Although the Kosovo dispute was out of the remit of the UN, Russia has already gained a significant foothold in Belgrade's foreign policy considerations. The party politics and domestic concerns played no small part.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The period between 2008 and 2012 in Serbian foreign policy was based on two systemic realities that continue to shape Serbian foreign policy to this very day: Kosovo's independence and the power vacuum caused by the lack of adequate presence by Western players.

There is no doubt that Kosovo's independence had the most potent effect on Serbian foreign policy behaviour, but it is primarily an occurrence imposed on Serbia by the international system. That occurrence was also part of the broader pattern of a power vacuum that came full circle with the global financial crisis. As the EU could not invest adequate efforts into integrating the Balkans, a new permissive environment emerged. In that environment an opportunistic Russia that was engaged in its rivalry with Western powers seized the opportunity. Serbia was left trying to maximise gains by striking a

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<sup>478</sup> Jelena Diković, 'A od Rusa – ništa (And from the Russians - Nothing)', *Danas*, 25 August 2011, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/a-od-rusa-nista/>, accessed 21-10-2019

<sup>479</sup> Miroslav Jovanović, 'Two Russias: On The Two Dominant Discourses of Russia in the Serbian Public', p.51

balance between Russia and the West. In trying to do so, the DS government tried to run an overly ambitious and incoherent policy that ultimately failed.

Domestically, the DS-led government tried to avoid internal backlashes while attempting to score points in the domestic arena, constituting a big part of the domestic dynamic that contributed to the Serbian balancing act. At that time, Serbian leadership tried to avoid domestic attacks from the opposition on the Kosovo issue, thus tying itself to Russia. Moreover, the domestic public opinion became divided into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps. To stay competitive in the domestic political arena, the DS played the Russian card to try to keep the votes of both the EU and pro-Russian voters, and prevent the latter from giving votes to another party. However, as Vladimir Međak told the author: “The DS, actually, only suffered damage in that balancing because their electoral body was not the pro-Russian one. In that segment, the balancing was a necessity just like it is today. Necessity because of Kosovo and the need for Russia to block Kosovo in the UN, but from that balancing the DS only suffered damage.”<sup>480</sup> The international system has demonstrated that it will still trump any foreign policy solely based on indulging domestic impulses. In 2012 a new Serbian government was in office, and it was up to this government to try and reformulate Serbian foreign policy.

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<sup>480</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019



## **CHAPTER VI: THE QUIET BEFORE THE STORM - THE SERBIAN BALANCING ACT 2012-2014**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter will cover the period between 2012 and 2014, and will analyse the policies conducted by the new Serbian government, formed after Boris Tadić, and the DS lost the 2012 presidential elections to Tomislav Nikolić, the candidate from the conservative, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). This government was led by Ivica Dačić who became the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, and Aleksandar Vučić from the SNS became the Minister of Defence and the First Deputy Prime Minister. Even though former nationalists led the new government, they still launched unpopular policies, such as normalisation of relations with Kosovo, which the West warmly welcomed. Moreover, during this period, the West did not perceive Belgrade's close ties with Moscow as threatening.

The chapter's title "The Quiet Before the Storm" refers to the brief period of relative tranquillity in Serbia's balancing act between Russia and the West. This chapter shows that Serbia mostly maintained its formal policy of balancing, and that it was a period where it was easy to implement that policy both internationally and domestically. Therefore, this chapter lays out that there were underlying nuances to Serbia's balancing act. Although the Kosovo dispute and the power vacuum remained important factors, there was no comprehensive rivalry between Russia and the West. Therefore, the balancing act could be pursued without much underlying risk.

On a systemic level, the EU and the US greeted the new government as their new champion that started a dialogue on normalisation of relations with Kosovo. Moreover, the rivalry between Russia and the West was not as potent, leaving the Balkans and Serbia outside of broader geopolitical tensions, thus providing some systemic leeway for Serbia to conduct its balancing policy. The critical element of Serbia's balancing act was simple, even though relations between Russia and the West were far from harmonious during this period it did not reach the level of tensions that came about in 2014 with the Ukrainian

Crisis. Thus, the chapter provides the readers with an important contextual element of this study.

On the domestic level, the new Serbian government, formed of former nationalists, faced fewer domestic hurdles as it could start a Kosovo dialogue and reduce Russia's role. Serbian leadership at that time had no problem with its national political power, as it was not faced with major political hurdles domestically. Moreover, it was also a period in which the opposition was in turmoil. Serbia's fragile multiparty democracy did not slide in an illiberal direction; this occurred when Vučić and the SNS consolidated their power later. This also contributed to the lack of domestic hurdles for the new government in Belgrade. In trying to explain the domestic sources of the Serbian balancing act, this chapter will also show the genesis of the SNS, as the party was born from the splintering of the nationalist SRS. While this process took part during the period described in the previous chapter, it makes more sense within this chapter's narrative since it shows how Serbian political parties leverage foreign policy to win power. As it abandoned the nationalist ways of its SRS predecessor, the SNS acquired support from the EU and the US, which propelled the SNS to power in 2012. The support that the SNS gained from the US and the EU is one reason why the balancing act was tranquil during this period and why there were not that many turbulent events.

Methodologically, this chapter does not deviate from the rest of the study. It relies on the same set of methods described within the other chapters: case study, process tracing and analytical narrative. This chapter uses not only secondary source material but also primary sources collected through fieldwork interviews. It is worth stressing that this chapter will be the briefest compared to the other two empirical chapters. The primary reason for this is technical, as this chapter covers the shortest period. Moreover, during the fieldwork, the sources interviewed were least elaborate in describing this period as a relative lack of contradictions marked the Serbian balancing act during that time. Nevertheless, for a firm empirical and contextual understanding of the Serbian balancing act, Serbian policy behaviour and the domestic background during this period must be explained.

## 6.2 Serbia and the European Union

The relationship between Serbia and the EU was determined on a systemic level by the Kosovo dispute. The EU took over primary responsibility for resolving the dispute, emerging as the principal great power. On a domestic level, the party competition played an influential role as the SNS leveraged its relationship with the EU to win power. The nationalist credentials of the SNS enabled it to run foreign policy without any significant domestic hurdles.

### 6.2.1 Systemic Factors

In systemic terms, the relations between Serbia and the EU during this period were dominated and shaped to a large extent by the Kosovo dispute. The EU was happy to embrace the new government that came about after Tadić's electoral defeat, as the new government wanted to be more cooperative on the Kosovo dispute. For the EU this dispute was important, as the EU's ambitions dictated that Brussels resolve one of the most pressing strategic and diplomatic issues in the region.

The new policy on Kosovo was quickly put into motion by the new government. Tomislav Nikolić during his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2012 called for "direct negotiations on the highest political level, without the recognition of Kosovo's independence." As Nikolić stated: "We strongly desire that the talks be continued in good faith and with good intentions, taking into account, among other things, that it is important to keep the dynamics of the European integration of Serbia and of the Western Balkans as a whole in order to ensure progress and stability of the entire region in the long term. ... At the same time, may I be clear: Serbia is not ready and cannot nor will it ever under any circumstances recognise, either explicitly or implicitly, the unilaterally declared independence of its southern province of Kosovo and Metohija."<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> 'Serbia wants top level direct Kosovo talks', B92, 25 September 2012, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&dd=25&nav\\_id=82341&version=amp](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&dd=25&nav_id=82341&version=amp), accessed 07-12-2019

The EU quickly jumped on this opportunity to assert itself as the primary geopolitical player in Serbia and the Balkans by supporting Serbia-Kosovo talks and eventual EU membership for Serbia. On 30 October 2012, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, alongside the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, visited Belgrade, showing full Western support to the new government.<sup>482</sup>

Catherine Ashton ran the negotiating process that followed, which came to be known as the Brussels Dialogue. Throughout this process, Serbia and Kosovo were represented by Ivica Dačić, and Hashim Thaçi, Kosovo's Prime Minister. The height of the honeymoon between Serbia and the EU was the signing of the so-called Brussels Agreement between Belgrade and Priština on 19 April 2013. Of many provisions of the Agreement, the most important one was the merger of the four Serb municipalities in the north (North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić) into the Association of Serb Municipalities (ZSO), which would be subjected to Kosovo's legislation.<sup>483</sup> The local Serbian community could select local police commanders, and police's composition needed to reflect the ethnic structure, with only Kosovo police being allowed to be stationed in the north.<sup>484</sup>

Catherine Ashton complimented Dačić and Serbia: "The recommendations to open negotiations for EU membership with Serbia and to open negotiations for an SAA with Kosovo mark a decisive break with the past and a common step towards a European future. I would like to pay tribute to the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo for their courage and vision. I am honoured to have been able to contribute to this process."<sup>485</sup> On that same occasion Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy,

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<sup>482</sup> Bojana Barlovac, 'Clinton, Ashton Urge Serbia to Continue Kosovo Talks', *Balkan Insight*, 30 October 2012, <https://balkaninsight.com/2012/10/30/clinton-ashton-urge-serbia-to-continue-kosovo-talks/>, accessed 03-04-2020

<sup>483</sup> Bojana Barlovac, 'Kosovo and Serbia Reach Historic Deal in Brussels', *Balkan Insight*, 19 April 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/04/19/kosovo-and-serbia-may-seal-eu-deal/>, accessed 02-04-2020

<sup>484</sup> Piotr Smolar, 'Serbia and Kosovo sign historic agreement', *Guardian*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/serbia-kosovo-historic-agreement-brussels>, accessed 02-04-2020

<sup>485</sup> 'Serbia and Kosovo: Historic Agreement Paves the Way for Decisive Progress in Their EU Perspectives', *European External Action Service*, 22 April 2013, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-13-347\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-347_en.htm), accessed 08-12-2019

said: “Serbia and Kosovo have proved they can both focus on the future rather than staying entangled in the past. Our recommendations today are therefore clear: both Serbia and Kosovo deserve to move on decisively in their EU perspectives. This is good news for the people in Serbia and Kosovo, and in the whole region.”<sup>486</sup> Slobodan Samardžić said that unlike the previous governments that were divided between Kosovo and remaining on the Western periphery, the government that came in 2012: “firmly decided in favour of the EU path no matter the cost, even at the cost of renouncing Kosovo”, alluding to the Brussels Agreement.<sup>487</sup>

The relations with the EU were also productive within the domain of security policy, as Serbia cooperated with the EU in their Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In May 2013, the Serbian Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić told the Serbian parliament that the EU’s invitation to Serbia to participate in its Mali mission implied “closer cooperation and partnership” and “leads to closer relations” with the EU.<sup>488</sup> The ultimate prize for Serbia and its government came about on 28 June 2013, when the European Council decided to open accession talks with Serbia in January of 2014 at the latest.<sup>489</sup> During this brief period, it appeared that the EU was a strategic priority of Serbian foreign and security policy.

### **6.2.2 Domestic Factors**

To understand the relationship between Serbia and the EU in the period between 2012 and 2014, one must first understand the domestic circumstances in which the new government in Belgrade came about. During the period described in the previous chapter, a decisive event of recent Serbian political history took place. It explains a significant part of the domestic environment shaping Serbian foreign policy, and is particularly important in explaining present-day Serbia and its foreign policy conduct. Moreover, it

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>488</sup> ‘Taking part in EU missions “leads to closer relations”’, *B92*, 15 May 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=15&nav\\_id=86181](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=15&nav_id=86181), accessed 29-02-2020

<sup>489</sup> ‘EU set for Serbia membership talks’, *BBC*, 28 June 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23099379>, accessed 02-04-2020

also shows the correlation between foreign policy and how political parties can leverage that same policy to increase their chances of winning within the Serbian political market. This decisive event was the split that happened in 2008 within the most dominant party of the anti-Western political bloc, the SRS.

The EU became the main point of contestation between the formal party leader, Vojislav Šešelj, who from his jail cell at the ICTY still advocated for old nationalist policies, and Tomislav Nikolić who was leading the SRS in Šešelj's absence. Nikolić saw Šešelj's insistence on nationalistic fervour and the renunciation of the EU as an impediment to the SRS winning power. The conflict slowly started to simmer as Šešelj became suspicious of Nikolić due to his secret meetings with Boris Tadić and US diplomats. This resulted in Šešelj issuing in September 2008 an order to some of SRS's MPs to condemn from the parliamentary floor any member of SRS who meets with Tadić in secret, which was a clear message to Nikolić.<sup>490</sup> The decisive moment came that same month, showing that Nikolić was ready to change the game altogether.

As the ruling majority led by the DS was getting prepared to ratify the SAA, Nikolić came out with a statement that the MP's of SRS would vote in favour of ratification if an amendment gets adopted affirming Serbian commitment to treat Kosovo as its sovereign territory. Božidar Đelić, who was Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European integration, consulted with Nikolić in secret and asked the reasons for such a dramatic political shift. Nikolić's response was: "I had enough of losing."<sup>491</sup>

Serbia's case provides an example of how political parties use foreign policy to improve domestic political competitiveness by changing their foreign policy program, affecting the state's foreign policy behaviour. Eventually, neither was the SRS amendment adopted nor did the SRS MPs vote for SAA ratification, as Šešelj prevailed within the SRS.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> 'Dokumentarni film - "SNS: Početak - 2008."' (Documentary film – "SNS: Beginning -2008"), *N1*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhUX4WpoXro>, accessed 03-11-2019

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., accessed 03-11-2019

<sup>492</sup> Daisy Sindelar, 'Nikolic At Center Of Serbia's Nationalist Meltdown', *Radio Free Europe*, 22 September 2008, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Nikolić\\_At\\_Center\\_Of\\_Serbias\\_Nationalist\\_Meltdown/1202040.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Nikolić_At_Center_Of_Serbias_Nationalist_Meltdown/1202040.html), accessed 03-11-2019

The split within the SRS was now complete. Nikolić and Vučić split from the SRS, forming a new conservative political party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

The SNS parted ways with the extreme anti-EU rhetoric and with the radical nationalist positions of the 1990s. This split has been neatly described by the seasoned Balkan observer, Tim Judah: “As the years passed, though, the gap between formal party leader Šešelj’s take on reality - as viewed from the perspective of the 1990s and from his cell on the Dutch seaside - and Nikolić’s own became too great for Nikolić to bear. Irritated because the party’s vote was increasing, not thanks to Šešelj but in spite of him, and because Šešelj treated him like an errand boy, Nikolić decided in 2008 to quit. When he did so, he took most of the party leadership with him to found a new party, the Serbian Progressive Party.”<sup>493</sup>

With this transformation, the SNS picked up a significant portion of SRS’s membership, cadre and voters. The formal consensus among the mainstream political parties in Serbia suddenly became more comprehensive as the SNS proclaimed Serbian membership in the EU as one of its policy goals. As one Serbian diplomat told the author: “For Serbia, the enlargement policy had only become absolutely acceptable and prevalent from 2008, when the breakdown and split in the Serbian Radical Party happened. The Serbian Radical Party was an enormous obstacle to adopting that policy within the political arena and the public. From that moment on with the creation of the Serbian Progressive Party, which accepted the EU and Serbia joining the EU, the policy of enlargement becomes an integral part of Serbian politics.”<sup>494</sup>

Another Serbian diplomat told the author: “One thing has to be clear from the start. As far as the domestic circumstances are concerned, in practical terms, Serbia finally resolved its EU entry issue once and for all. As they would say in the West, it is no longer a divisive issue. As far as the Serbian domestic political scene goes, that happened when the SNS was formed. When Radicals lost power, weight and volume on the domestic

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<sup>493</sup> Tim Judah, ‘At Last, Good News from the Balkans’, accessed 16-10-2019

<sup>494</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

political scene, when that happened, Serbia in a way had come to terms with itself.”<sup>495</sup> This source also spoke of one occasion when a state official of a country where the source served as the Ambassador back in 2008, asked him about the situation in Serbia: “I said that the situation was never better, as an internal peace was achieved regardless of the chaos surrounding Kosovo. The internal peace has been achieved through the formation of a political party that no longer questions Brussels and the EU as our goal.” Ivan Vejvoda, a past adviser to several Serbian officials, said that the formation of the SNS speaks of what he calls “deep political sociology of Serbia”, in which a party has to embrace a pro-European course to win power.<sup>496</sup>

Moreover, the SNS gained a mighty boost in the domestic arena, as it became more competitive domestically by being an acceptable political force for the EU. That way, although the DS took part in the formation of the SNS, it inadvertently created an even more powerful competitor for itself domestically that the SRS ever was, given that it could not scare Serbian voters with SRS’s anti-EU rhetoric anymore. Moreover, the EU was less willing to support Tadić and the DS as it was in 2008 because the SNS, as the new alternative to the DS, was perceived as less threatening by the EU than its nationalist predecessor, the SRS.<sup>497</sup> Like the SPS in 2008, the SNS also showed how parties could cash in on foreign policy within the domestic arena, which paid off handsomely for the SNS when the new elections were held in 2012.

On 6 May 2012, Serbia was in the full electoral cycle as the country was undergoing parliamentary and presidential elections, and local and provincial elections in the Serbian autonomous province of Vojvodina. In the parliamentary elections, one could see that Boris Tadić and the DS were on the defensive as the DS was second in the election behind SNS. It is also important to note that the SRS was below the electoral threshold for the first time, leaving it outside the parliament, but the most important fact was that the SPS

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<sup>495</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>496</sup> Author’s interview with Ivan Vejvoda, a Permanent Fellow at the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences, and a past adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>497</sup> Džudi Bat, ‘Serbia under Tadić’, pp.137-138



was third in the elections.<sup>498</sup> Again neither the SNS nor the DS could form the ruling majority in the parliament without Dačić and the SPS's backing.

The political game had yet to be decided as Tadić and Nikolić were about to face off in the second round of presidential elections. Dačić was aware that he and his party were the biggest winners of the parliamentary elections as they were now in a position, as kingmakers, to name their price. Dačić named his price. After the parliamentary elections, Dačić said to the Serbian media in a very boastful and assertive fashion: "Maybe in Serbia we still do not know who will be the President, but we know for certain who is going to be the Prime-Minister."<sup>499</sup>

The second-round loss in the Presidential elections by Tadić and the DS to a controversial figure like Tomislav Nikolić was surprising at first. Still, the causes of the electoral loss were evident from the start. The reasons were related to economic hardship, which manifested itself in "24 per cent unemployment", alongside the "political culture of cronyism and corruption, and accusations of authoritarianism", the last one being the product of the fact that Tadić and DS dominated the political scenery.<sup>500</sup>

The EU quickly accepted the new power brokers in Belgrade as they were ultimately disappointed with Tadić. The crisis between Serbia and the EU that started with Angela Merkel's visit to Belgrade in August 2011, subsequently led to a situation where the EU and the US "benevolently greeted" Nikolić's victory, expecting a "softer stance" on Kosovo and that the new government would "deliver."<sup>501</sup> As I was told: "The international community has written off Boris Tadić. The best example is the fact that the

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<sup>498</sup> 'Republic of Serbia – Parliamentary and Early Presidential Elections 6 and 20 May 2012', *OSCE - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, Warsaw, 31 July 2012, p.24, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/e/92509.pdf>, accessed 21-05-2021

<sup>499</sup> 'Dačić: Možda se ne zna ko će biti predsednik, ali se zna ko će biti premijer (Dačić: Maybe We Do Not Know Who Will be the President, But We Know Who Will be the Prime-Minister)', *Blic*, 6 May 2012, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/dacic-mozda-se-ne-zna-ko-ce-bit-predsednik-ali-se-zna-ko-ce-bit-premijer/pxrx6y0>, accessed 07-12-2019

<sup>500</sup> Dan Bilefsky, 'In Serbia, a Populist Makes Gains in Elections Marked by Anger Over the Economy', *The New York Times*, 6 May 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/world/europe/in-serbia-voters-disillusioned-by-the-economic-crisis.html>, accessed 03-12-2019

<sup>501</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

European Commission congratulated Tomislav Nikolić for his win at 17:00, while the polls close at 20:00.”<sup>502</sup>

However, waiting in the background of this entire process was the new political reality that was unfolding. Aleksandar Vučić was emerging as the most powerful political figure in the country, even though Serbia’s institutional and constitutional arrangements did not mandate that. On the contrary, Vučić would be expected to occupy position number four within the formal Serbian political hierarchy.<sup>503</sup> By controlling the biggest political party, Vučić became “the modern Serbian version of Warwick the Kingmaker”, as the government’s survival in the parliament depended on the party under his control.<sup>504</sup>

How did this come about? Firstly, Vučić outmanoeuvred Tomislav Nikolić, who under pressure from Vučić and the West resigned from his position as the president of the SNS. Despite being President of Serbia, Nikolić remained a lame-duck figure. What leverage Vučić and the West used to constrain Nikolić is unknown. However, Srđan Bogosavljević described this process: “At that moment, the West saw Vučić as a man who has to deal with an explicitly pro-Russian president whom Vučić managed to sideline very skilfully from the party. If Vučić had not done so, the power would be in Nikolić’s hands, not his. At no point was Nikolić a pro-European person. He was clearly a pro-Russian figure. Very clearly and very determinedly. ... In 2013, there were also party elections within the SNS, where all Nikolić’s people were excluded from the party leadership. Not a single one remained. ... The balance of power within the party shifted. Nikolić was eliminated as a serious player.”<sup>505</sup>

Secondly, Vučić overpowered Dačić. Despite the latter being the PM, Vučić controlled the largest party in the parliament, and most ministers were from the SNS. Vučić was thus

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<sup>502</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>503</sup> Drago Hedl, ‘Vučić: I’m a man with a new idea’, *B92*, 30 August 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/insight/interviews.php?yyyy=2013&mm=08&dd=30&nav\\_id=87507](https://www.b92.net/eng/insight/interviews.php?yyyy=2013&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=87507), accessed 23-02-2020

<sup>504</sup> Kim Sengupta, ‘Aleksandar Vucic: The man who’s bringing Belgrade in from the cold’, *Independent*, 4 August 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/aleksandar-vucic-the-man-who-s-bringing-belgrade-in-from-the-cold-8745600.html>, accessed 23-02-2020

<sup>505</sup> Author’s interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

able to outvote Dačić within the government. In Bogosavljević's words: "Vučić did not need to be the president. Vučić did not need to be the PM. He would still have all the power."<sup>506</sup> Thirdly, within the division of spoils, Vučić took control of the Serbian intelligence services. This was not just a source of power for Vučić, but also a basis of his domestic popularity as he engaged in an anti-corruption clampdown that targeted the likes of the retail tycoon Miroslav Mišković and certain members of the DS.<sup>507</sup>

Fourthly, the DS, which was supposed to be the main opposition to Vučić, started to weaken as the party proved unable to reform itself, and instead became burdened with internal divisions that resulted in the massive departure of high-ranking members. Within those divisions, Vuk Jeremić became the president of the UN General Assembly and was expelled from the DS.<sup>508</sup> Dragan Đilas, who became the new president of the DS, was dismissed as Mayor of Belgrade by Vučić and the SNS through a majority within the City Assembly of Belgrade in September 2013.<sup>509</sup> Even Boris Tadić, until then the DS's honorary president, left the DS to form his party.<sup>510</sup> By emulating the DS's pro-EU policy, the SNS "in a way completely marginalised the DS and the opposition."<sup>511</sup> Finally, even the potential nationalist opposition to Vučić was weak during that time as the SRS remained outside the parliament. Moreover, the Serbian Orthodox Church experienced, at one point, a drop in popularity as the newspapers started publishing a series of articles on corruption and paedophilia within the church's ranks.<sup>512</sup> It remains unknown whether Vučić's government instigated these articles, but a significant source of nationalist opposition to Vučić was weakened.

The way Vučić subdued Nikolić, Dačić and other rivals again show the nature of the Serbian polity, where despite what the formal Constitution implies, the issue of who has

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Neil Buckley, 'Vucic emerges as real power in Serbian government', *Financial Times*, 28 October 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/2652c2cc-3a42-11e3-9243-00144feab7de>, accessed 23-02-2020

<sup>508</sup> Bojana Barlovac, 'Serbia's Former Ruling Party Ejects Jeremic', *Balkan Insight*, 15 February 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/02/15/serbia-s-democrats-kick-out-jeremic/>, accessed 10-04-2020

<sup>509</sup> Neil Buckley, 'Vucic emerges as real power in Serbian government', accessed 23-02-2020

<sup>510</sup> 'Former president leaves Democratic Party', *B92*, 30 January 2014, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=01&dd=30&nav\\_id=89173](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=01&dd=30&nav_id=89173) accessed 10-04-2020

<sup>511</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>512</sup> Author's interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

the most political power is ultimately determined by who controls the largest party. Consequently, the party leader who heads the party will also dominate the entire political scenery and public policy, including the foreign policy. As Vučić controlled the most powerful party, his domestic foundation for implementing difficult policies was stronger. On that account, Vučić earned political support from the EU by being able to pursue Kosovo policy in a way that its DS predecessor never could.<sup>513</sup> Serbian reality during this period was the same as it always has been. Foreign policy behaviour was in part shaped by domestic party competition. Simultaneously, foreign policy was utilised to achieve an advantage over party competition, as Vučić was able to earn EU support with its Kosovo policy.

The fact that the former associates of Slobodan Milošević gave new momentum to the Kosovo dispute resolution led some to call it the “Nixon in China phenomenon.”<sup>514</sup> Jelko Kacin, the European Parliament’s rapporteur for the Balkans, called Dačić for signing the Brussels Agreement “The Balkans Nixon.”<sup>515</sup> This refers to Richard Nixon making an overture towards Maoist China and forming an anti-Soviet alliance with it while avoiding the domestic backlash that almost any other US president would face from engaging with Mao’s China. Nixon could perform this task as he had the credentials of a hard anti-communist who even made his career by denouncing the Chinese communist government and could not be attacked by political opponents for being soft on communist regimes. Lawrence Freedman drew similar conclusions on Menachem Begin’s signing of the Camp David Accord: “Peace deals are more likely when hard-liners are in government, both because they are forced to appreciate the realities of the situation and because they are unlikely to be effectively challenged from the right.”<sup>516</sup>

In that same spirit, the government led by the SNS and the SPS could not be accused of the lack of nationalist credentials as it was led by Milošević’s allies and associates from

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<sup>513</sup> Neil Buckley, ‘Vucic emerges as real power in Serbian government’, accessed 23-02-2020

<sup>514</sup> Mladen Mladenov, ‘An Orpheus Syndrome?’, p.159

<sup>515</sup> Vladimir Krulj, ‘Comment - why Serbia’s long and arduous path to EU membership will be worth it’, *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/serbia/10093623/Comment-why-Serbias-long-and-arduous-path-to-EU-membership-will-be-worth-it.html>, accessed 12-04-2020

<sup>516</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, (New York: 2008), p.60

the 1990s. Moreover, these two political parties were much better positioned than the DS to manage any domestic political crisis that could emerge from any accommodation on Kosovo as their constituency comprised the most conservative and nationalist members of Serbian society. This fitted into Vučić's policy behaviour from this period. As Zoran Lutovac, current President of the DS, told me: "Just a reminder. He [Vučić] came to power with one story, a critic of the pro-Western government that preceded his government. Then, upon coming to power, he completely changed his tune. From being a nationalist, he became an alleged advocate of the European path."<sup>517</sup> A stark contrast to the days in opposition when Vučić and the SNS promised to annul all the agreements negotiated by Borko Stefanović, only to elevate the talks with Kosovo Albanians to an even higher political level with the Brussels Dialogue.<sup>518</sup>

The SPS-SNS government's resilience to domestic opposition on Kosovo was tested when the Brussels Agreement was reached. Slightly over a month before the Agreement was signed, Dačić wrote an article whose words perfectly symbolised a significant shift in Serbian Kosovo policy, showing how the new government embarked on a domestically riskier policy than its predecessors. As Dačić wrote then: "Lies were told that Kosovo is ours, it was even made official in the Constitution. Today, the Constitution is not helping at all. The Serbian president cannot go to Kosovo, nor the prime minister, nor ministers, nor the police or army."<sup>519</sup> In April 2013 the DSS held protests against the Agreement.<sup>520</sup> In May, protests were organised by the Serbian leaders from northern Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church and right-wing groups, during which the word "treason" was shouted regularly.<sup>521</sup> However, the new government did not back down in the face of these protests, proving that they were more resilient to domestic backlash than Tadić and the

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<sup>517</sup> Author's interview with Zoran Lutovac, a former Serbian Ambassador and President of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>518</sup> Author's interview with Miloš Jovanović, President of the DSS and Professor in International law and International Relations at the University of Belgrade, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>519</sup> 'Lies were told that Kosovo is ours - PM', *B92*, 7 March 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=03&dd=07&nav\\_id=85044](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=03&dd=07&nav_id=85044), accessed 02-04-2020

<sup>520</sup> 'Opposition Protest in Belgrade over Kosovo Deal', *Balkan Insight*, 22 April 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/04/22/opposition-to-protest-in-belgrade-over-kosovo-deal/>, accessed 01-04-2020

<sup>521</sup> Nemanja Cabric, 'Thousands of Serbs Protest Against the Brussels Agreement', *Balkan Insight*, 10 May 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/05/10/thousands-serbs-protest-against-the-brussels-agreement/>, accessed 01-04-2020

DS. Elizabeth Pond described the government's resilience to these protests: "Any previous centrist government would have had to back down in the face of such resistance from north Kosovo Serbs, the Church hierarchy and the ultranationalists who would have rallied to their cause. But this time, it was the ex-ultranationalist parties themselves that were making peace with the West, and these ex-chauvinists could not be blackmailed."<sup>522</sup>

Both the SNS and the SPS used this domestic resilience to get acceptance from the EU and the West, which helped them prevail in the domestic turf war. As Dimitar Bechev described it: "Ironically, it was self-avowed pro-Western politicians such as Tadić who oversaw the resumption of relations with Moscow. And it was Aleksandar Vučić, a one-time prominent member of Šešelj's Radicals, who, first as deputy prime minister between 2012-2014 and then as premier, would advocate rapprochement with the Kosovars as an entry ticket to the EU."<sup>523</sup> This shows that political parties' ideological profile, while far from irrelevant, takes second place to political pragmatism. All the political parties in Serbia and their leaders are primarily opportunistic actors who choose policies that will be most beneficial domestically to their ratings and chances to win power.

A domestic calculus based on political survival logic was always present in how the Serbian government interacted with the EU, particularly regarding the Brussels Dialogue. This policy still needed to be sold at home. In April 2013, Serbia negotiated an informal agreement with the EU's help, which prevented Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) from entering Serbian-dominated municipalities in Northern Kosovo. Dačić asked for domestic approval before a final decision could be passed on to Catherine Ashton: "I expect the ruling coalition to accept Brussels' offer which is the best Belgrade can get at the moment. ... This is the best we can do at the moment. This is the first time that the north and the Serb community in Kosovo have been internationally recognised."<sup>524</sup>

On that same occasion, Dačić said that Serbia must "save what can be saved in Kosovo", adding that Kosovo PM Thaçi "did not get what he was expecting – that Serbia will hand

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<sup>522</sup> Elizabeth Pond, 'Serbia Reinvents Itself', *Survival*, Vol. 55, Issue 4, August-September 2013, p.9

<sup>523</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.64

<sup>524</sup> 'PM: We reached best possible solution', *B92*, 20 April 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=04&dd=20&nav\\_id=85801](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=04&dd=20&nav_id=85801), accessed 28-02-2020

over the north. ... Albanians thought that we will accept everything they asked for because of a date [for the start of the EU accession talks] but it did not happen.” These statements were directed towards the wider Serbian public and the domestic constituency, showing how the Serbian government was preparing its people for the complicated Serbian position in the Kosovo dispute. It also indicates that the Serbian government and the party leaders who led it continued to tread carefully in presenting the country’s foreign policy to the domestic audience.

The dominance that Vučić and his SNS party was achieving has led some to believe that Serbia was “sliding into dictatorship and single-party rule.”<sup>525</sup> This process only partially came to fruition as Serbia under Vučić did not emerge into an open, single-party dictatorship. Still, it did transform into an illiberal regime. In that political setting, multipartyism still exists, but not under fair conditions, as Vučić and his party control all the levers of power. Beyond any doubt, the political landscape started to change even more drastically, affecting Serbian foreign policy, which will become apparent in the next empirical chapter.

### **6.3 Serbia and The United States**

Serbian policy towards the US was conducted in an external environment in which the US was not interested in Serbia and the Balkans, passing the buck on regional security and the Kosovo dispute to the EU. The US observed Serbia and regional developments from the sidelines. Still, the US is the most powerful country within the international system, making it an important factor in Serbian foreign policy considerations, particularly concerning security issues. Domestically, the new government also leveraged its ties with the US to win power in Serbia.

#### **6.3.1 Systemic Factors**

During the designated period, mainly due to systemic factors, the US-Serbian relations were stable. The new government focused most of its efforts and rhetoric on EU

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<sup>525</sup> Neil Buckley, ‘Vucic emerges as real power in Serbian government’, accessed 23-02-2020

integration and relations with Russia. In contrast, some of the other themes, like transatlantic relations or nonalignment, were rarely discussed.<sup>526</sup> This was due to systemic factors. The Balkans and Europe were not deemed as priorities for the US during this time. The Kosovo dispute remained the most important issue for US policy in the region. Naturally, the dominant position of the US in the international system still meant that Serbia had to have a careful policy on the US, including on security issues like NATO. As one source described it: “As they are a superpower, the US embassy has to do something, but the attention of the US administration was focused elsewhere.” For this source, the fact that Obama did not have a summit with the EU until his second term shows the lack of US interest in Europe and the Balkans during that time.<sup>527</sup>

During this period, the US upheld the policy that has been in place since 9/11, leaving the primary stabilising role in EU hands, stepping in only when the need arises. As Slobodan Samardžić described it: “The EU took over that task of integrating Serbia into a geopolitical sphere. So, the US represented in a way some kind of external supervisor of that entire process. They never abandoned that role, but the US was not the central actor in those main political issues. The EU became the main actor.”<sup>528</sup> For Vladimir Međak: “The US appears in the form of a silent, big brother sitting in the next room and listening to what Serbia is saying with the EU in the other room.”<sup>529</sup> Philip Reeker, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department was a perfect example of the fact that the US “sat in the backseat of the car” in the Balkans.<sup>530</sup> Namely, Reeker was always present in Brussels during the Belgrade-Priština talks, monitoring the process. For the US, the only concern related to Serbia and the Balkans was that no major problems arise.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> Mladen Mladenov, ‘An Orpheus Syndrome?’, p.160

<sup>527</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>528</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>529</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Međak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>530</sup> Author’s interview with Ivan Vejvoda, a Permanent Fellow at the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences, and a past adviser to several Serbia officials, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>531</sup> Author’s interview with Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Belgrade, March 2019



Hillary Clinton confirmed this US position in 2012. As Clinton visited Priština, right after she and Catherine Ashton visited Belgrade, Clinton stated: “We will stand with you as you work with Serbia to resolve practical problems and overcome obstacles, and we will be there for you as you take the necessary steps towards the future you so richly deserve.”<sup>532</sup> This statement shows the US role in the Serbian systemic environment, where the US leaves the Kosovo dispute and regional affairs in the hands of the EU but is prepared to use its power capabilities if the need arises. The US’s role in Serbian foreign policy is “sometimes direct; sometimes, it is indirect.”<sup>533</sup>

Security policy has been one area where the US indirectly played a significant part by being the leading power behind NATO. As the Brussels Agreement was signed, the NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that NATO would guarantee that the Agreement is implemented. The guarantee that Rasmussen gave to Serbian negotiators was that the KSF would not be allowed to enter northern Kosovo except in the case of natural disasters, and with agreement from both NATO and the local Serbs.<sup>534</sup> This again shows that despite the US’s lack of interest, its power and importance on regional security issues via NATO still make it an important factor in Serbian foreign policy considerations, including during the designated period.

### **6.3.2 Domestic Factors**

The US factor was a powerful force in domestic party considerations, as the US also played a part in forming the SNS and its eventual rise to power. Afterwards, the US was less of a factor as the EU was at the centre, but selling cooperation with the US to domestic constituents was still in play. This process started during the political turmoil that followed Kosovo’s slide towards independence when the US tried to exercise its power by affecting Serbia’s internal political trends.

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<sup>532</sup> ‘Clinton Says Kosovo's Independence 'Not Up For Discussion', *Radio Free Europe*, 31 October 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/clinton-says-kosovo-independence-not-up-for-discussion/24756570.html>, accessed 03-04-2020

<sup>533</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’ of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>534</sup> ‘KSF “will not be able to go to north”’, *B92*, 19 April 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=04&dd=19&nav\\_id=85793](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=04&dd=19&nav_id=85793), accessed 11-04-2020

Before Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, Dragan Šutanovac, defence minister alongside Dragoljub Mićunović, talked in the DS's headquarters with several Western ambassadors and some of the leading figures of civil society in Serbia.<sup>535</sup> Cameron Munter, the US Ambassador to Serbia, conveyed the American assessment that SRS would be triumphant in the next Serbian parliamentary elections. As such, Munter wondered if the SRS under Nikolić's leadership can be reformed and if the grand coalition between the DS and the SRS is possible. Mićunović replied that as the pro-European party intent on finalising democratic reforms, the DS could not form coalitions with "politically retrograde parties", which was approved by the German Ambassador in the room.<sup>536</sup>

US interest in the grand coalition was motivated by a desire to form a numerically and politically powerful coalition of parties that would conduct a coherent policy. The motivation to co-opt the nationalist SRS into switching sides was essential for US designs as they were aware that SRS controls the most nationalist parts of the Serbian electorate. That way the SRS, as part of any ruling coalition, could guarantee the implementation of any international arrangement with the US and the West as the SRS would dampen any internal nationalist backlash. This logic mainly applied to the Kosovo issue, where the domestic, nationalist resistance was the highest.

Beyond the formal relationship with the DS-led government, the US kept track of the newly formed SNS. As Nikolić formed the SNS, he quickly met with the US and UK Ambassadors in Serbia, which was a novelty, as before parting ways with Šešelj, Nikolić only met with the Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Konuzin.<sup>537</sup> Cameron Munter reflected on this transformation in 2018: "America welcomed people who would help Serbia move on the road to the EU. Eventually, perhaps even going into NATO. So, when they [Nikolić and Vučić] began to talk about that theme, we welcomed it."<sup>538</sup> One can see the pattern again. One infers that Serbian political parties also recognise the international systemic reality that puts the US as the world's leading power. That way, they avoid being the

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<sup>535</sup> Dragoljub Mićunović, *Life in Bad Times III*, p.280

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, p.280

<sup>537</sup> 'Nikolić met with Western ambassadors', *B92*, 26 September 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=9&dd=26&nav\\_id=53761&start=0](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=9&dd=26&nav_id=53761&start=0), accessed 03-11-2019

<sup>538</sup> 'Documentary film – "SNS: Beginning -2008"', accessed 03-11-2019

target of US pressure and animosity. It also helped them on the domestic playing field as the US will not obstruct a political party that is an acceptable political partner.

Like the EU, the US quickly embraced the new government in Belgrade. As Lutovac stated: “The government that came to power in 2012 got Western support, among other things because Vučić and some other leaders that were in play told the West: Everything that the previous government did not want to do regarding Kosovo, we will do it.”<sup>539</sup> During the rest of the designated period, the US did not play that much of a role in Serbian party politics, or at least that role was not as conspicuous. The US left it to the EU to handle Belgrade and, more importantly, the Kosovo dispute, leaving the US to carefully observe the situation on the sidelines.

Moreover, the US was initially pleased that the new SNS government could pursue the Kosovo policy in a way that its DS predecessors could not, giving little reason for the US to be particularly active. However, the fundamental elements of Serbian policy, observed through domestic party politics, remained unchanged even regarding the US. These elements are securing the US’ acquiescence so that the parties in power could stay there and preventing any negative backlash in domestic public opinion from relations with the US and NATO.

The US also played a role when the SNS was forming the government in the summer of 2012. Philip Reeker was leading the charge on behalf of the US and the State Department. As the talks and bargaining among opportunistic political parties on who will form the government and at what price began, Reeker visited Belgrade. On that occasion, Reeker communicated with all the parties that passed the electoral threshold.<sup>540</sup> Among these parties were those that eventually formed the government, the SNS, the SPS and the G17 Plus, now transformed under the name the United Regions of Serbia (URS).

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<sup>539</sup> Author’s interview with Zoran Lutovac, a former Serbian Ambassador and President of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>540</sup> ‘SNS acting leader “keeps to agreement with U.S. official”’, *B92*, 4 July 2012, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=07&dd=04&nav\\_id=81093](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=07&dd=04&nav_id=81093), accessed 07-04-2020

Some sources noted that in these talks, Reeker promised that the new Serbian government would not change its foreign policy course, while Reeker told the SPS and the URS that they could pivot away from Tadić and the DS and enter into a coalition with the SNS.<sup>541</sup> This same source also said that both Nikolić and Vučić, as seasoned politicians, knew the weight of their promise and that they must not irritate the West in any way. Reeker and the US also helped Vučić significantly during the talks on the formation of the new government. During these talks, one of the main stumbling blocks for forming the new government was the SPS insisting on controlling both the Ministry of the Interior, Dačić's post from the previous government, and Serbia's leading intelligence service, the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). During the talks on government formation, the US was against one party controlling two of the most critical national security institutions, using as leverage the possibility of pushing for a grand coalition of the SNS and the DS that would leave out the SPS.<sup>542</sup> The US was making a bet on Vučić, helping him come on top in the Serbian political ranks. Again, foreign policy, including ties with great powers, are used by Serbian leaders to get ahead of their competitors. If you have the backing of the American superpower, you can really get ahead of the game.

Afterwards, the US was more of a silent factor. The Serbian government as usually tread carefully in managing its relations with the US and NATO, to avoid public opinion criticism, damaging their domestic standing. A small case in point is undoubtedly the April 2013 deal regarding access to the Serbian-dominated municipalities in North Kosovo by the KSF. Namely, this deal directly concerned the US and NATO as it stipulated that the KSF cannot enter northern Kosovo without approval from NATO and its Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission. Dačić said then: "This is the first time that the international community is on our side, and this should open up a new era in Serbia's relations with the West."<sup>543</sup> Although the Brussels Dialogue was held under EU auspices, Dačić referred to "the West" and not to the EU, a product of the fact that the NATO factor, and by inclusion, the US, was also present. Again, the Serbian government had to sell this agreement carefully to its domestic constituency.

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<sup>541</sup> Author's interview with former political adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>542</sup> 'SAD ne žele da BIA i MUP drži ista partija (The USA Does Not Want One Party Controlling Both BIA and MUP)', *Blic*, 4 July 2012, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/tema-dana/sad-ne-zele-da-bia-i-mup-drzi-ista-partija/5hrn7ph>, accessed 08-04-2020

<sup>543</sup> 'PM: We reached best possible solution', accessed 28-02-2020

The domestic calculations of the SNS-SPS government, based on the awareness that US support played a part in their coming to power, also played a role in the fact that the US-Serbian relations were not turbulent during this period. As usual with Serbian parties, the SNS government also tried to use foreign policy for domestic gains. These parties desired the pro-US or pro-NATO voters' votes, even though this is not as pronounced as in the case of the EU and Russia. The SNS-SPS government, similarly to Tadić, tried to avoid leaning their domestic stances too much towards the Russian or American side, resulting in a situation where one cannot describe that coalition as being "completely pro-Russian, and that it renounces America and NATO."<sup>544</sup>

## **6.4 Serbia and Russia**

The partnership between Serbia and Russia was not severed during this period, even though the EU dominated the Serbian foreign policy agenda in light of the Brussels Agreement. Russia was still a partner on whom Serbia counted, mainly on the Kosovo dispute. The Serbia-Russia relations were not causing frictions with the West that deemed Kosovo as the priority, and the relationship between Russia and the West did not become confrontational until after the Ukraine crisis of 2014. In domestic terms, Russia was still a factor that could be leveraged, given that pro-Russian sympathies were more potent within the SNS than the DS. Still, that factor was not as influential given that Kosovo dispute did not dominate the political agenda as before.

### **6.4.1 Systemic Factors**

Although power in Belgrade was won by a political party whose leaders and supporters had a strong leaning towards Russia, Russia was not a particularly striking partner at first for the new Belgrade government. This is mainly because, during Tadić's time, the Kosovo dispute management was moved from the UN onto the EU. The process became more pronounced with the start of the Brussels Dialogue with the EU as the mediator. In the words of Dimitar Bechev: "As Serbia agreed to entrust the EU with the Kosovo issue, Russia moved to the sidelines. The country's tilt to the East was followed by a tilt to the

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<sup>544</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

West.”<sup>545</sup> Slobodan Samardžić said: “After 2012, the new government returned the Russian factor to the fore, but only on the surface.”<sup>546</sup>

The new authorities in Belgrade did not entirely give up on the Russian factor. Tomislav Nikolić is generally perceived as a pro-Russian individual, and he was seen as one of Moscow’s best friends in Belgrade. Nikolić’s first foreign visit was to Russia when he met Vladimir Putin on the margins of Putin’s party congress, United Russia. Even though Nikolić as a newly elected President was not yet sworn in, making the visit an unofficial one, Nikolić made a couple of important points that show the reality of relations with Russia. As Nikolić told Putin: “I assure you that the cooperation between Serbia and Russia will be progressive. I assure you that Serbia is Russia’s partner in the Balkans. ... Serbia is on the road toward the EU. It’s a long and uncertain journey. We will organise the country in accordance with the EU rules.”<sup>547</sup> On that occasion, Nikolić also told Putin that Serbia will not join NATO and will not recognise Kosovo’s independence.

During this entire period, as shown from Nikolić’s communication with Putin, the underlying themes of Serbian foreign policy remained in place: not recognising Kosovo’s independence, not joining NATO, joining the EU and pursuing friendly relations with Russia. The last one was easy to pursue as the new government enjoyed Western support and was willing to tolerate the Russian factor in Serbian foreign policy, as long as the government in power followed the policy of EU integrations and was cooperative on Kosovo. Moreover, it was easy to pursue the friendly policy towards Russia as Russia’s relations with the West did not reach that much of a low point despite the cooling in relations with Vladimir Putin’s new presidential mandate.<sup>548</sup>

The logic of balance still existed in Serbian foreign policy as Nikolić told Russia Today in June 2013: “Serbia will never have as close and as strong relations with the West as

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<sup>545</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.64

<sup>546</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>547</sup> ‘Nikolić, Putin meet in Moscow, B92, 26 May 2012, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=05&dd=26&nav\\_id=80443](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=05&dd=26&nav_id=80443), accessed 28-02-2020

<sup>548</sup> Author’s interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

Russia does. Cooperation with Russia doesn't mean we have turned away from the EU. Cooperation with the EU doesn't mean we have turned away from Russia. Moscow has never told Serbia, directly or indirectly, that it should not cooperate with the EU.”<sup>549</sup> Nikolić still left the Russian card in play. Nikolić said in that same interview: “Unfortunately, when the talks started, Serbia decided to talk with Priština within the EU framework and never asked for someone to stand up for its interests. ... As for Russia, it will support any stance that Serbia takes. Russia has made it very clear that it will never recognise an independent Kosovo, and that means a lot to us. It's one thing to be the only country that refuses to recognise Kosovo and Metohija. It's a totally different thing when you are supported by other powerful countries that haven't recognised it either. Those involved include, first and foremost, Russia.” This was a clear sign that even though Russia did not play a prominent role, Serbia still kept a Russian option open, particularly regarding the Kosovo dispute.

Russia was not discounted completely. Indeed, as time moved on, the SNS-SPS government tended to reach out to Moscow in a way that the DS government never did. Although the draft of the agreement on strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia was finished in September 2011,<sup>550</sup> this agreement was not signed during Tadić's time. In May 2013, Tomislav Nikolić and Vladimir Putin signed a declaration on strategic partnership in Sochi, with Nikolić announcing a “new era” in cooperation.<sup>551</sup> The mentioned themes were Russian support on Kosovo and the planned South Stream project, while two sides praised the cooperation and expressed hope in its further development.

The military domain was one area of cooperation that became more striking under the new government. In April 2013 the SNS-SPS coalition did what the DS government did

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<sup>549</sup> ‘Serbia will never lose Kosovo, but in Pristina I'm not President – Serbia's leader to RT’, *RT*, 2 Jun 2013, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/serbia-kosovo-president-interview-110/>, accessed 02-03-2020

<sup>550</sup> Jelena Cerovina, ‘Završen sporazum o strateškom partnerstvu Rusije i Srbije (The Strategic Partnership Agreement between Russia and Serbia is Finished)’, *Politika*, 27 September 2011, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/192585/Završen-sporazum-o-strateskom-partnerstvu-Rusije-i-Srbije>, accessed 29-03-2020

<sup>551</sup> ‘Nikolić, Putin sign strategic partnership declaration’, *B92*, 24 May 2013, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=24&nav\\_id=86333](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=24&nav_id=86333), accessed 29-03-2020

not do despite isolated votes in favour. In April 2013 Serbia was granted observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the CSTO, showing that they were taking steps in their Russian policy that Tadić and the DS never did. In May 2013 Serbian Army Chief General Ljubiša Diković went on an official visit to the Russian Federation, where he met his Russian counterpart Valery Gerasimov Viktorovich.<sup>552</sup> Later on, Diković commented on that visit: “Military cooperation between Russia and Serbia was not at the level where we wanted it to be, but lately it has been improved. The signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the two countries has given new impetus to the cooperation with Russia.”<sup>553</sup> The statement implied that the new government planned to intensify its military partnership with Russia in a way that did not transpire under the DS government. In November 2013, the Russian Defence Minister came for a two-day visit to Serbia that resulted in the signing of an agreement on military cooperation, while areas like air force, air defence, and military training and exercises were covered during the bilateral talks.<sup>554</sup> Unlike in the past, when Russia filled the vacuum carefully, through for instance economic instruments, when it acquired NIS after 2012 Russia tried “through military cooperation to strengthen its position in the Balkans primarily by influencing Serbia.”<sup>555</sup>

On the economic front, Serbo-Russian relations were not static, and not only because of Serbian energy dependency on Russia and plans for the South Stream pipeline. As Ivo Visković said: “It was not until 2012 that we had an improvement in economic cooperation with Russia.”<sup>556</sup> In 2013, Serbian exports to Russia increased from USD 225 million in 2005 to USD 1,065.1 million.<sup>557</sup> In April 2013, Ivica Dačić met Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow where Russia granted Serbia a 10-year loan with 3.5 per cent interest valued at USD 500 million, for the Serbian budget deficit, while Russia

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<sup>552</sup> ‘SAF CHOD in the Russian Federation’, *Serbian Armed Forces*, 30 May 2013, <http://www.vs.rs/en/news/425E704CC91311E2915700163E135009/saf-chod-in-the-russian-federation>, accessed 05-03-2020

<sup>553</sup> ‘General Dikovic’s interview to Vecernje Novosti’, *Serbian Armed Forces*, 5 July 2013, <http://www.vs.rs/en/news/1D4355E0E54011E2915700163E135009/general-dikovic-s-interview-to-vecernje-novosti>, accessed 05-03-2020

<sup>554</sup> ‘Russia and Serbia to sign military cooperation agreement’, *TASS*, 12 November 2013, <https://tass.com/russia/705647>, accessed 05-03-2020

<sup>555</sup> Author’s interview with Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> Jovan Teokarevic, ‘Serbia’, in ‘Absorb and Conquer: An EU Approach to Russian and Chinese Integration in Eurasia’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2016, p.61



earlier lent USD 800 million to Serbia to overhaul its railways.<sup>558</sup> For some of the consulted Serbian diplomats, the desire to form alternative capital sources has been a manifestation of the Serbian balancing policy.<sup>559</sup>

Serbia could pursue its cooperation with Russia during that period with ease as there were no major risks attached to it in the systemic environment. Serbia had more space to manoeuvre as the global environment allowed it, given that the West itself lacked a unified position on how to behave towards Russia.<sup>560</sup> During this period, the West was “lulled in its partnership, primarily an economic one with Russia”, while the Obama administration still tried to maintain some stability in its relationship with Russia.<sup>561</sup>

This was a period of “*interregnum*” when the Ukraine Crisis of 2014 and the worsening of relations between Russia and the West has not yet happened.<sup>562</sup> As Dimitar Bechev said: “If you backtrack to 2012, with Putin still being assertive, the level of polarisation and conflict between Russia and the West was very different. There was a sense of competition, but you did not have this burning of bridges as after 2014.”<sup>563</sup> The Ukraine Crisis systemically helped change the dynamic of the Serbian balancing act, which will be addressed in chapter seven.

#### **6.4.2 Domestic Factors**

During the DS-led government period, Russia was aware that it has potential allies in the opposition and the government. If we leave out the nationalist and conservative SRS and the DSS in the opposition ranks, the newly formed SNS also worked very well for Russian interest. At the founding congress of the SNS in October 2008 Nikolić said: “We want

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<sup>558</sup> Darya Korsunskaya, ‘Russia to lend Serbia \$500 million, pledges support on Kosovo’, *Reuters*, 10 April 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-serbia-loan/russia-to-lend-serbia-500-million-pledges-support-on-kosovo-idUSBRE9390OP20130410>, accessed 31-03-2020

<sup>559</sup> Author’s interview with Branka Latinović, a retired Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, February 2019; Author’s interview with Pavle Jevremović, a retired Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>560</sup> Author’s interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>561</sup> Author’s interview with Jelica Kurjak, former Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>562</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>563</sup> Author’s interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow at Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

things to be better for everyone, to regain our friends in the world, for East and West to be parts of the world and not fate, to be a bridge between East and West, to be proud, to be the Russian Federation's best partners and proud EU members."<sup>564</sup> For Russia, this was a perfect situation. More importantly, it shows the partisan consensus where all the major political parties form a unified set of attitudes towards Russia and the EU to ensure the balance between two sides internationally, and have a shot at winning power domestically.

Once the SNS rose to power, Russia was not overly pronounced in domestic calculations of Serbian politicians between 2012 and 2014. This is understandable as the Kosovo dispute did not play a prominent role in Serbian domestic politics as it did during Tadić's era. This change came about from the fact that the Brussels Dialogue dominated the political agenda., and the emergence of the SNS as the most powerful player in the Serbian political market was brought about with Western support, not Russian. Slobodan Samardžić observed: "Paradoxically, they [the SNS] through the pro-Russian electorate run a pro-Western foreign policy."<sup>565</sup>

Naturally, Russia was not totally excluded. Tomislav Nikolić was frequently the one who generated pro-Russian sentiments. In instrumental political terms, this was a way of not dropping the Russian factor completely given the socio-political origin of the SNS and its voters who still had Russia leanings. From Nikolić's statements to the Russian media, one can see a need to maintain the balance between the EU and Russia both for foreign and domestic usage. As Nikolić said: "Serbia will never choose between East and West. It wants to be part of both. ... I think that those who want us to look in only one direction don't have the interests of Serbia at heart."<sup>566</sup> This statement represents the same logic prevalent throughout this study—the logic where the Serbian politicians avoid alienating neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western voters.

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<sup>564</sup> 'Nikolić party holds founding congress', *B92*, 22 October 2008, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=10&dd=22&nav\\_id=54407](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=10&dd=22&nav_id=54407), accessed 04-11-2019

<sup>565</sup> Author's interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>566</sup> 'Serbia will never lose Kosovo, but in Pristina I'm not President – Serbia's leader to RT', accessed 02-03-2020

The new Serbian leadership could make statements and moves that would be difficult to contemplate for the previous government. As Nikolić said to *Russia Today*: “Serbia will never lose Kosovo, but on the other hand, I’m not the President in Priština. This is painful, but unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do about it.”<sup>567</sup> Tadić did make similar statements. Around 2011 as the idea on the partition of Kosovo started to circulate, Tadić adopted the rhetoric that while Belgrade will not govern Kosovo, Priština will not establish governance over Kosovska Mitrovica and other Serb populated municipalities north of the river Ibar.<sup>568</sup>

However, Tadić and his government circulated the idea of partition but never openly, and assertively advocated for that solution model, evidently out of fear of the loss of power. Tadić also would not dare make such a statement to the Russian media outlet out of fear that pro-Russian and nationalist voters might perceive him of having a softer stance on independent Kosovo than Russia. As opposed to Tadić, Nikolić could make such a statement. Nikolić could do so as he was a politician with nationalist and pro-Russian credentials who had no viable nationalist opposition, while Tadić lacked both those credentials and had nationalist opposition in Nikolić, his SNS, and other nationalist parties.

Sympathy towards Russia remained a powerful force in Serbian society and with the Serbian public, so that every Serbian politician and Serbian political party needed to take it into account. An excellent example came in 2013, when Serbian Patriarch Irenaeus (Irinej) met with Putin in Moscow. Expressing gratitude for Russian support for Serbia on Kosovo issue, Irenaeus said: “We rely on God and on Russia.”<sup>569</sup> The Russian factor started again to play a more influential role in Serbian party politics after the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014, affecting the Serbian balancing act.

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> Bojana Barlovac, ‘Ghost of Partition Haunts Kosovo-Serbia Talks’, accessed 25-10-2019

<sup>569</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.230

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter proves that the Serbian balancing act, that includes Serbian efforts to join the EU, pragmatic if not particularly close relations with the US, and partnership with Russia can be pursued with low-risks if there is a suitable combination of systemic and domestic factors. On a systemic level, the power vacuum (during this period more salient for the US than for the EU) and the Kosovo dispute continued to determine the Serbian balancing act. Domestically, the party and elite competition continued to act as a decisive conduit between the systemic environment and Serbian foreign policy conduct.

However, this chapter also shows the differences in intensity of the Serbian balancing act and the risks and tensions attached to it depending on systemic and domestic dynamics. This chapter in both empirical and conceptual terms provides reliable contextual and explanatory power to this study. It shows the Serbian balancing act being implemented without strategic tensions and risks, and also describes a vital transition phase between the DS era that started the balancing act out of necessity, and the one after the Ukraine Crisis of 2014 when the balancing act was even more intense as Russia was more present in Serbian foreign policy than before.

Systemically, the EU tried to assert itself as the Balkans' central power by leading the charge on the Kosovo dispute, thus embracing the new Serbian government. In that sense, it appeared that the EU was trying to end the vacuum it initially helped create back in 2008. US policy was also a powerful systemic force. The US did not have an intense desire to be active in Serbia and the Balkans, which is always a factor in Serbian considerations. However, the US is still deemed to be important as its role in the Kosovo dispute affects Serbian behaviour. Its international dominance makes Serbian policymakers mindful of their relationship with the US. Russia was still a factor in Serbian foreign policy, mainly because of its non-recognition of Kosovo. Belgrade was tranquil in its balancing act as the West was focused on resolving the Kosovo dispute, while

relations between Russia and the West, while damaged, were not as contentious as they became after 2014.<sup>570</sup>

Domestically, political parties as usually leveraged foreign policy to avoid domestic backlash and outmanoeuvre the competing parties by gaining the great powers' support and winning both pro-Western and pro-Russian voters. The SPS-SNS government followed the pattern that has been present in Serbia since the 1990s, the one where foreign policy contributes to the rise and fall of Serbian governments, which in this case refers to how the SNS and SPS embraced the EU to win power.<sup>571</sup> It was pragmatism which drove what used to be a war-mongering political party to transform itself and win power as a promoter of European policies.<sup>572</sup> As such, the SNS government "did not come to power by accident"; instead it promised to conduct a different Kosovo policy to that of its predecessors, and won Western support that way.<sup>573</sup> During the 2012-2014 period, the essential domestic reality affecting Serbian foreign policy remained the same as in the past. Serbian political parties will continue promoting a foreign policy that avoids alienating domestic constituents. They will continue using foreign policy to win power, which allowed the SNS to win the grand prize during this period.

This period was one where Belgrade could easily conduct its balancing act. However, this did not last, as in 2014 with the Ukraine Crisis, Serbia's regional and systemic environment changed, and balancing became more contentious and riskier to pursue. The domestic dynamic has also changed, as under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, Serbian polity tilted towards the illiberal political model, creating a completely different domestic background for Serbian foreign policy. These changes will be addressed in the next and final empirical chapter.

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<sup>570</sup> Author's interview with Sonja Liht, a former President of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia and President of the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Belgrade, June 2019

<sup>571</sup> 'From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integrations', p.11

<sup>572</sup> Author's interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>573</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019

## **CHAPTER VII: THE STORM BEGINS - THE SERBIAN BALANCING ACT 2014-2020**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter will analyse the Serbian balancing act in the period after the Ukraine crisis of 2014, making it crucial to explain the current stage in Serbia's foreign policy balancing act and identify its sources. This part of the study is highly relevant as it demonstrates that the intensity of the Serbian balancing act depends on the level of strategic tensions between Russia and the West, which in systemic terms builds upon the factors of the regional power vacuum and the Kosovo dispute.

The Ukraine Crisis was a turning point that was dangerous for Serbia both because, after a very long time, the West and Russian came close to direct conflict and because of the danger of having a linkage between the status of Crimea and Kosovo.<sup>574</sup> As the relations between Russia and the West became more confrontational, Russia became more engaged in the Balkans, using an opening left by the EU's retreat from the region, caused by enlargement fatigue, the migrant crisis and Brexit.

The relations with the US were shaped by a different systemic context, where the US showed more interest in the Balkans because of increased Russian activity, but not enough to impose any meaningful change at first. Later on, the US played a significant role, rolling back Russian influence in the Balkans by speeding up NATO membership for Montenegro and North Macedonia. This process demonstrated that US power is a major part of the systemic environment shaping Serbia's balancing act, in that it was the US, rather than the EU, that checked Russia in the Balkans (showing the limits of Serbian balancing). On the Kosovo issue, the US under Trump also started playing a different role, leading Serbia to believe that it could get a less painful settlement on Kosovo. Consequently, the US became a more attractive partner, demonstrating that the Serbian balancing act is an opportunistic policy. The attempt to form a partnership with the US

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<sup>574</sup> Author's interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

failed with the electoral win of Joseph Biden in the US, but the US will remain a significant factor in shaping Serbian policies.

As Serbia and the Balkans became one of the battlegrounds in the rivalry between Russia and the West, Serbia tried avoiding any risks and engaged in an opportunistic partnership with Russia to leverage the West and extract concessions from both sides. The Ukraine Crisis also made the Serbian balancing act more complicated in light of the Kosovo dispute. As the Kosovo dispute gradually intensified around 2015, Russian support in the UN Security Council again became imperative for Belgrade. Still, the balancing became more assiduous after the Russian seizure of Crimea, which Moscow justified with the Kosovo precedent.

Despite the fact of Russia using the analogy with Kosovo in its seizure of Crimea was a complicating factor for Serbia, the reliance on Russia in the Security Council left Serbia with no alternative. The Kosovo issue forced Belgrade to play the Moscow card once again, mainly as Serbia-Kosovo talks under the EU's auspices started to stagnate from 2015. However, this chapter will also consider Russia's declining influence in the Balkans due to pushback by the US, leaving Serbo-Russian ties largely reduced to the Kosovo dispute. This reality remains even though Belgrade made something of a repivot to Moscow to get protection given the rise of Joseph Biden's Presidency. This change will give us a clear temporal benchmark based on which one can conclude this study.

Domestically, party politics remained the prevalent unit level variable: since 2014 the dominance of Vučić and his SNS have led Serbia further into an illiberal direction, creating a state where one man dominates all public policy. However, even in those circumstances, the party's need to stay in power shaped foreign policy. The sensitivity to the Kosovo issue, declining EU enthusiasm, the unpopularity of the US and NATO, as opposed to Russia's popularity, implied that the only concept of foreign policy for which the Serbia government could have support from the population is the balancing act. The EU, for the ruling SNS, was not a goal enthusiastically promoted in domestic politics, but it was still used as a source of domestic legitimacy for the Serbian government. Playing the Russia card was also a way for Belgrade's government to have the EU tolerate the

declining state of democracy in the country by instilling fear that Serbia could pivot towards Russia. Relations with the US also occurred in the domestic context of the US being unpopular among the Serbs, making it a frequent target among the nationalists. However, with Trump's emergence, the domestic environment slightly changed as Trump was more appealing to the Serbian public.

In the case of Russia, the domestic logic of party politics was most pronounced. Due to Russia's high popularity and domestic vulnerability in the unresolved Kosovo issue, Serbia could not join the EU sanctions and other anti-Russian policies. Instead, the Serbian leadership sought the balancing act to win over pro-Russian and pro-Western voters by avoiding tilting fully towards either the EU or Russia. By building a partnership with the highly popular Putin and Russia, the Serbian leadership hoped to gain domestic legitimacy while trying to get a better deal on Kosovo by using Russia, hoping to profit domestically.<sup>575</sup> The pro-Russian atmosphere promoted domestically by the Belgrade government was also a way to leverage the West and muster its acquiescence to the growing illiberalism at home by instilling the perception that Vučić could easily be outpowered by pro-Russian players besieging him. Using Russia to achieve domestic mileage remains a temptation for the Serbian leadership.

The methodological scope of this chapter remains unaltered compared to the other chapters of the study. The research methods applied in making this chapter remain: the case study, process tracing and analytical narrative. This chapter relies on both secondary source material and primary sources based on fieldwork interviews.

## **7.2 Serbia and The European Union**

On a systemic level, the regional power vacuum largely shaped Serbian policy towards the EU. The EU discounted the possibility of a quick enlargement, which only increased later on with the migrant crisis and Brexit. This reality has not changed within the timeframe of this study. Belgrade was less enthusiastic in aligning itself with the EU's

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<sup>575</sup> Author's interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019



policies, including on Russia. The EU's role as the mediator in the Kosovo dispute also collapsed during this period. Domestically, the EU became an occasional target of government propaganda, but it was also an instrument of domestic legitimacy.

### 7.2.1 Systemic Factors

The reality of the power vacuum generated by the EU's inability to finalise enlargement in the Balkans was a systemic environment that started shaping Belgrade's behaviour very early on. The beginning of accession talks between Serbia and the EU in early January 2014 would normally imply that the EU has re-asserted itself as the Balkans' primary power and that Serbia would coordinate its foreign policy with the EU. However, from the very start of this period, one could see that the enlargement would be a complicated process, which implied that the systemic reality of a power vacuum in the Balkans and Serbia stranded on the Western periphery continued. In those circumstances, the EU had little ability to influence Serbian policy, and Serbia had little incentive to follow the EU's lead on the foreign policy front. The accession was an unremitting process for Serbia and the EU. The accession negotiations began in January 2014, and it took two years for Serbia to open its first two chapters in the accession talks in December 2015.<sup>576</sup>

This was announced openly by Jean Claude Juncker in June 2014 in his address to the European Parliament before he assumed the post of the President of the European Commission in November. Juncker stated that there would not be an EU enlargement during his term: "The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years."<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> Tomasz Żornaczuk, 'Forever on the Periphery? The Return of Geopolitics to EU Enlargement to the Balkans', *Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, Policy Paper No. 147, No. 6, February 2016, p.1

<sup>577</sup> 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission', *President Juncker's Political Guidelines*, 15 July 2014, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/president-junckers-political-guidelines\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/president-junckers-political-guidelines_en), accessed 11-07-2020

Johannes Hahn, the new EU Commissioner, took over the portfolio re-titled “European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations” from the old title “Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy”, which instilled the perception in the Balkans that the region is not a priority for the EU.<sup>578</sup> Having observed this new trend in the EU, Serbia started to swing away from coordinating and aligning its policies with the EU. For a very long time, Russia was the biggest challenge Serbia faced in aligning itself with the EU’s foreign and security policy.<sup>579</sup>

Ivica Dačić, in the capacity of new foreign minister, as Serbia was presiding over OSCE, cancelled his trip to Kyiv in May 2015 at the last minute to avoid angering Moscow, while Tomislav Nikolić was the only non-CIS European leader attending the Victory Day Parade in Red Square in Moscow that same month.<sup>580</sup> With the Victory Day Parade Serbia broke ranks with the EU, as Western and European leaders decided not to attend the Parade due to the Russian conflict with Ukraine.<sup>581</sup> The most famous example of Serbia’s refusal to join the EU’s policy on Russia is its refusal to join the EU’s sanctions against Russia. In 2020 Serbia’s percentage of alignment with EU’s foreign policy was 56 per cent. Serbia declined to align with eleven EU declarations on Russia and on some occasions has even abstained from supporting declarations involving regimes close to Moscow, like Syria and Venezuela.<sup>582</sup>

The migration crisis did not help the Balkans in their European aspirations. During a meeting on the Balkan migration route in October 2015, it was observed that after nearly a year in office European Council President Donald Tusk did not visit the Balkans. Instead, his first trip to the Balkans came in late November 2015, and the trip concerned the EU’s cooperation with Serbia and Macedonia on the migration crisis.<sup>583</sup> The migration

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<sup>578</sup> Tomasz Żornaczuk, ‘Forever on the Periphery?’, p.3

<sup>579</sup> ‘Tocci: Relationship with Russia biggest challenge for Serbia’, *European Western Balkans*, 13 July 2016, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2016/07/13/tocci-relationship-with-russia-biggest-challenge-for-serbia/>, accessed 19-07-2020

<sup>580</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.83

<sup>581</sup> ‘Serbia Breaks Ranks With EU on Moscow Parade’, *Balkan Insight*, 7 April 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/04/07/serbian-army-joins-military-parade-in-moscow/>, accessed 20-06-2020

<sup>582</sup> ‘An analysis of Serbia’s alignment with the European Union’s foreign policy declarations and measures in 2020’, pp.4-6

<sup>583</sup> Tomasz Żornaczuk, ‘Forever on the Periphery?’, p.5

crisis confirmed that the Balkans became a strategic periphery for the EU, thus diluting the EU's leverage and Serbia's desire to embrace the pro-EU policy.

As the Balkans was not a priority for the EU, external powers like Russia used this opening to step into the region. Consequently, Belgrade has an incentive to pursue its opportunities with Russia and other non-Western powers to compensate for the lack of EU perspective. The EU's Balkan stance was "on policy autopilot", where the focus was on the process of benchmark decisions rather than on genuine political substance. These circumstances lead to the situation where "the costs and benefits of a distant EU prospect are reassessed when set against the more tangible benefits offered by other strategic actors."<sup>584</sup> Indeed, just like the Eurozone Crisis in 2008, the migrant crisis and Brexit have diluted and decreased the attractiveness and magnetic power of the EU, leading to the situation where the role of the EU has not changed significantly, but its leverage in the Balkans has decreased.<sup>585</sup>

The UK's decision in the 2016 referendum to leave the EU (Brexit) has cemented the state of a power vacuum in the Balkans and the EU's inability to deal with challenges in its backyard. Brexit caused a political and institutional crisis and has triggered a debate on the future of the European project. With the EU preoccupied, both Serbia and the Balkans are sidelined from the priority list. Vučić took note of that: "There is no doubt that this will have significant consequences, in both the short and long terms. What will the EU enlargement policy be I cannot tell you at this moment."<sup>586</sup>

Nevertheless, the EU was becoming more aware of the Russian challenge in the Balkans. In 2017, Federica Mogherini, in the capacity of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated explicitly regarding Russian activities in the Balkans that "The Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power

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<sup>584</sup> Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Vessela Tcherneva, 'Is the EU losing the Western Balkans?', accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>585</sup> Author's interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>586</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, 'Brexit shakes hopes of Balkan EU bidders', *The Associated Press*, 30 June 2016, <https://apnews.com/03abbc7f960842b5be6e463db975daf5>, accessed 18-07-2020

game can be played. So the concern is there ... and it is profound.”<sup>587</sup> The EU took notice of various forms of Serbo-Russian cooperation and would always issue warnings if it deemed that cooperation to be against Serbia’s EU integration. Despite taking note of the Russian activity in the region and despite the EU officials’ statements, there is not enough evidence that the EU has done enough to counter this activity by embracing the Balkans more confidently. As long as that is the case, there will be a vacuum in the region, giving non-Western powers like Russia a degree of leeway to operate in, and providing a permissive systemic environment for Serbia to pursue its balancing act.

During this period, the EU did not wholly disappear from Belgrade’s policy radar, thanks to the EU’s leading country, Germany, and its chancellor Angela Merkel. A diplomatic initiative known as the “Berlin process”, which aimed to strengthen multilateral cooperation in the Balkans and keep the momentum of EU integration going, led many to talk about the “German moment” in the Balkans.<sup>588</sup> However, while the “Berlin process” was a sign of partial European re-engagement, it did not present an objective strategic change to the *status quo*, and it was not perceived as such in the Balkans.<sup>589</sup>

The EU, particularly Germany, tried to establish peace and stability in the region so that no crisis can emerge that would force them to invest their resources and energy in the region that otherwise would not be considered a priority. Still, this logic and rigid membership condition led many in Belgrade to ask whether the EU path is worth it.<sup>590</sup> However, for a long time, Vučić tried to avoid Boris Tadić’s mistake of angering Angela Merkel. As it was conveyed to the author, “I think that he may be impressed with the Russian role in Ukraine, but I think he is most impressed by Germany in every sense. ... He is daily in contact with his mentor in Berlin.”<sup>591</sup> Vučić bought many sympathies in

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<sup>587</sup> ‘EU ministers: Balkans becoming ‘chessboard’ for big powers’, *Euractiv*, 7 March 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-ministers-balkans-becoming-chessboard-for-big-powers/>, accessed 13-06-2020

<sup>588</sup> ‘Knocking on heaven’s door’, *The Economist*, Vol. 416, Issue 8953, 27 August 2015, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2015/08/27/knocking-on-heavens-door>, accessed 11-07-2020

<sup>589</sup> Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Vessela Tcherneva, ‘Is the EU losing the Western Balkans?’, accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>590</sup> Author’s interview with Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>591</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

Berlin and with Angela Merkel by backing her immigration policies during the migrant crisis.<sup>592</sup>

None of the EU initiatives bore any fruit in changing Serbian behaviour, indicating the EU enlargement's declining influence. In February 2018, the EU published an enlargement strategy that asserted that Serbia could join the EU in 2025 with an agreement on Kosovo and harmonisation with EU's foreign policy being the central conditions.<sup>593</sup> Still nothing happened, as, without assertive EU leadership, Serbia and the Balkan countries cannot progress to the EU, both because of the EU's own problems and internal political dysfunctions in the Balkans (including declining EU enthusiasm).<sup>594</sup> The apex of the EU's lack of strategic commitment to the Balkans was French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to veto the start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.<sup>595</sup> In an interview with the Financial Times, Vučić made it clear that the French move creates the Balkans' need to focus on themselves and rely on other powers, like Russia and China, and not just the EU. "We need to take care of ourselves. That's the only way, that's the only approach. Everything else would be very irresponsible," Vučić said.<sup>596</sup>

The EU's weakened strategic clout came to the fore in regards to the Kosovo issue. The talks on Kosovo were led from 2014 to this day by Aleksandar Vučić, first with Isa Mustafa, Kosovo's Prime Minister (2014-2017), then later on with Hashim Thaçi (Thaçi became Kosovo's president in 2016 and Vučić the president of Serbia in 2017). Without a realistic scenario of Serbia joining the EU, the EU lacks both the incentive and leverage over Belgrade. The same goes for Priština, which does not even have visa liberalisation

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<sup>592</sup> Author's interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>593</sup> 'Lavrov: EU, NATO wrong to force 'West or Russia' on the Balkans', *Euractiv*, 19 February 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/lavrov-eu-nato-wrong-to-force-west-or-russia-on-the-balkans/>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>594</sup> Author's interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>595</sup> Robin Emmott, Francesco Guarascio, and Marine Penner, 'France under fire for 'historic error' of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls', *Reuters*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans/france-resists-eu-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia-and-albania-idUSKBN1WX1CT>, accessed 19-08-2020

<sup>596</sup> Valerie Hopkins, 'Balkan nations bank on regional ties after EU snub', *Financial Times*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/508dcea4-f4ce-11e9-b018-3ef8794b17c6>, accessed 19-08-2020

with the EU. The EU could not guide the two parties to negotiate in good faith, resulting in Belgrade and Priština engaging in mutual provocation since 2015.

After a ten-month pause, the dialogue between the two parties began again in February 2015 as everybody awaited government formation in Priština.<sup>597</sup> Little progress has been made to this day. Priština is delaying its obligation from the Brussels Agreement on the formation of Association of Serb Municipalities (ZSO), making it one of the biggest obstacles to a final settlement. The Priština government launched a diplomatic campaign of trying to gain membership in several international institutions. In 2015 Kosovo tried to get membership in UNESCO; it failed to do so by three votes after the Serbian campaign against its UNESCO membership, as Belgrade feared that it would allow Priština to endanger and appropriate Serbian cultural and religious monuments in Kosovo.<sup>598</sup> Even there, one can see the EU's failure, as the EU did not include protecting Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo in its accession talks with Serbia, allowing the subject to become contested.<sup>599</sup>

In January 2017, tensions were also on the rise as the future Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj (2017-2020) was released from French custody after an initial arrest on a Serbian war crimes warrant. Serbia soon dispatched a train to Kosovo, decorated with paintings of Orthodox saints inside and outside with the slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" in 21 different languages.<sup>600</sup> The Kosovo police were sent to prevent the train from entering Kosovo, but the Serbian side stopped the train well before that. In 2018 Kosovo's bid to join INTERPOL failed due to Belgrade's opposition. This was a third unsuccessful bid for Priština in the previous four years as it had failed in 2015 and 2016, and in 2017 it withdrew its membership application.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Maja Poznatov, 'Belgrade-Priština dialogue resumes', *Euractiv*, 12 February 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/belgrade-pri-tina-dialogue-resumes/>, accessed 25-07-2020

<sup>598</sup> 'Kosovo fails in Unesco membership bid', *Guardian*, 9 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/09/kosovo-fails-in-unesco-membership-bid>, accessed 24-07-2020

<sup>599</sup> Author's interview with Tanja Mišćević, a political science professor, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>600</sup> Guy Delauney, 'Train row almost pulls Kosovo and Serbia off the rails', *BBC*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38666279>, accessed 25-07-2020

<sup>601</sup> 'Kosovo Fails For Third Time To Win Interpol Membership', *Radio Free Europe*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-fails-for-third-time-to-win-interpol-membership/29610709.html>, accessed 24-07-2020

In the meantime, Serbia launched a campaign spearheaded by FM Dačić to convince countries, mostly in Africa and the Caribbean, to withdraw recognition of Kosovo. According to the Serbian government by March 2020, concluding with Sierra Leone, 18 countries withdrew their recognition of Kosovo.<sup>602</sup> The complete breakdown of EU-mediated talks came when the government in Priština responded to Belgrade's derecognition campaign and its failed INTERPOL bid, hit Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina with a 10 per cent, and then 100 per cent customs tariff, in violation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).<sup>603</sup> Serbia abandoned the EU-led talks until Kosovo lifts the tariffs.

The relations with the EU became incredibly tense from 2018 when Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaçi came up with an idea of a land swap to resolve the Kosovo dispute. In that swap, the Preševo Valley in southern Serbia with an Albanian population would go to Kosovo, while the Serb-populated territories in north Kosovo would go to Serbia. This proposal came to be referred to in public discourse as demarcation and border adjustment. The EU was interested in this proposal, including Federica Mogherini and the EU commissioner for enlargement, Johannes Hahn. Mogherini was enthusiastic about being the one under whose tutelage the long-standing dispute could be resolved.<sup>604</sup>

This initiative was discarded by the EU's most powerful country, Germany, which feared that the land swap might create a bad precedent for other territorial disputes in the Balkans.<sup>605</sup> The EU lost control over the Kosovo dispute in September 2018 when Vučić and Thaçi called off a face-to-face meeting on the land swap brokered by Mogherini in Brussels.<sup>606</sup> A day after Vučić cancelled the meeting in Brussels with Thaçi, Vučić visited

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<sup>602</sup> 'Sierra Leone withdraws Kosovo's recognition', *The Government of the Republic of Serbia*, 3 March 2020, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/150855/sierra-leone-withdraws-kosovos-recognition.php>, accessed 24-07-2020

<sup>603</sup> 'Kosovo hits Serbia with 100% trade tariffs amid Interpol row', *BBC*, 21 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46287975>, accessed 24-07-2020

<sup>604</sup> Guy Delauney, 'Kosovo-Serbia talks: Why land swap could bridge divide', *BBC*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45423835>, accessed 10-07-2020

<sup>605</sup> Philipp Jenne and Lorne Cook, 'Germany, some EU partners oppose Serbia-Kosovo land swap', *The Associated Press*, 31 August 2018, <https://apnews.com/31f016959d0543fa8a43dbe17dbd0850/Germany.-some-EU-partners-oppose-Serbia-Kosovo-land-swap>, accessed 10-07-2020

<sup>606</sup> Robin Emmott, 'Serbia, Kosovo leaders abruptly cancel EU-brokered meeting on land swap', *Reuters*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo-eu/serbia-kosovo-leaders-abruptly-cancel-eu-brokered-meeting-on-land-swap-idUSKCN1LN1SD>, accessed 21-07-2020



the Gazivoda Lake Dam in Kosovo, whose ownership Belgrade and Priština disputed.<sup>607</sup> Thaçi responded to this visit by dispatching special forces to the Gazivode area at the end of September, followed by Thaçi personally touring the area.<sup>608</sup>

The EU tried desperately to restart the Belgrad-Priština dialogue under EU mediation, including efforts by the new EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, and Miroslav Lajčák, the newly appointed Special Representative for the Belgrade-Priština dialogue.<sup>609</sup> The EU faltered as Vučić and Thaçi accepted the leadership of Donald Trump and the US to resolve the Kosovo issue, including a possible land swap. In a domestic political struggle, the Trump administration sided with President Thaçi against Kosovo PM Albin Kurti, backed by Germany due to his opposition to the eventual land swap, resulting in a no-confidence vote for Kurti in March 2020 and a rebuff of EU and Germany.<sup>610</sup>

However, after Thaçi was faced with a preliminary indictment from the special court on Kosovo at the Hague, Vučić was forced to return to the EU-brokered talks. In doing so, Vučić, alongside Kosovo's Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, Josep Borrell, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, attended a video call on 10 July in Paris, after a bilateral meeting with Macron, and later Vučić and Hoti participated in a meeting in Brussels chaired by Borrell.<sup>611</sup> These meetings produced no tangible outcomes, but Vučić had to court the EU more openly. In that context, Vučić told Macron that Serbia accepted the new methodology of EU enlargement, a French initiative intended to change the

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<sup>607</sup> 'Serbian President Makes Rare Visit To Kosovo, Says Finding Deal Difficult', *Radio Free Europe*, 8 September 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-president-makes-rare-visit-to-kosovo-says-finding-deal-is-difficult/29479135.html>, accessed 25-07-2020

<sup>608</sup> 'ROSU special forces briefly deployed at Gazivode', *NI*, 29 September 2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a423999/ROSU-special-forces-briefly-deployed-at-Gazivode.html>, accessed 25-07-2020

<sup>609</sup> 'Borrell: "Status quo" in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue unsustainable', *B92*, 30 April 2020, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=04&dd=30&nav\\_id=108416](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=04&dd=30&nav_id=108416), accessed 23-08-2020

<sup>610</sup> Shaun Walker, 'Kosovans look on aghast as government falls while coronavirus bites', *Guardian*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/kosovo-government-falls-in-vote-of-no-confidence>, accessed 23-08-2020

<sup>611</sup> Dimitar Bechev, 'Serbia-Kosovo deal: Can the EU succeed where Trump failed?', *Al Jazeera*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/europe-achieve-serbia-kosovo-deal-200713154245236.html>, accessed 24-08-2020



enlargement dynamics.<sup>612</sup> For Belgrade, the EU will remain a factor in its foreign policy that cannot be ruled entirely out.

For Serbia, the biggest challenge will remain how to reconcile its Kosovo policy and EU integration. The EU no longer has the same pull for new members, making the EU process for Belgrade burdensome, particularly given the EU's inability to resolve the Kosovo dispute and the fact that Vučić angered Europe by flirting with land swap and the US.<sup>613</sup> Vučić's partnership with Germany is also over, because of the idea of the land swap and his growing authoritarianism at home.<sup>614</sup> Instead, Vučić shows a tendency to court Macron's France, which he started doing during Macron's impressive visit to Belgrade in July 2019.<sup>615</sup>

The future of Serbia's relations with the EU is uncertain. In 2020 Serbia did not open a single chapter in its accession talks with the EU due to the decline in the rule of law.<sup>616</sup> This decision cast a shadow of doubt about the longevity of the EU's tolerance towards Vučić's Serbia. Still, this partnership might persevere either until Vučić crosses some red line or until he resolves the Kosovo dispute, which might lead the EU to renounce him and attack him for his illiberal domestic policies.<sup>617</sup>

## 7.2.2 Domestic Factors

The 2014 parliamentary elections were a turning point in recent Serbian political history. When the results came in, there was no longer any doubt that Vučić is the genuine power holder in Serbia, and not Dačić, as the SNS won an absolute majority in numbers of

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<sup>612</sup> 'Vučić: I notified Macron that Serbia accepts the new EU enlargement methodology', *European Western Balkans*, 10 July 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/10/vucic-i-notified-macron-that-serbia-accepts-the-new-eu-enlargement-methodology/>, accessed 24-08-2020

<sup>613</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>614</sup> Snezana Bjelotomic, 'Bieber: "Germany's enthusiasm for Vucic has declined"', *Serbian Monitor*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/biebergermanys-enthusiasm-for-vucic-has-declined/>, accessed 23-08-2020

<sup>615</sup> 'Macron: France will never forget Serbia's role in the Great War', *NI*, 1 July 2019, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a500021/France-will-always-remember-Serbia-s-role-in-WW-I-Macron-says.html>, accessed 23-08-2020

<sup>616</sup> 'Rule of law kills Serbia-EU talks for this year', *Euractiv*, 4 December 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/rule-of-law-kills-serbia-eu-talks-for-this-year/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/rule-of-law-kills-serbia-eu-talks-for-this-year/), accessed 15-01-2021

<sup>617</sup> Author's interview with a former adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, April 2019

parliamentary seats. The SPS came second, while the DS and the New Democratic Party, led by Boris Tadić, passed the electoral threshold but were not competitors in numbers. The URS was out of the parliament, and so was the DSS.<sup>618</sup> The SPS was allowed to stay in government, even though the SNS could form the government by itself, so that the SNS could have a partner with whom to share responsibility and blame for any failed policies.<sup>619</sup>

As the DSS and the SRS were outside the parliament, one could easily interpret this as European integration victory in Serbian politics, as all the parties who passed the electoral threshold favoured EU integration in their formal program. However, it is not just the Russia-leaning SRS and the DSS which were out of the picture. The LDP, one of the rare Serbian parties that advocated Serbian membership in both the EU and NATO, was also out of the game.

This shows a more critical reality within that nexus between Serbian party politics and foreign policy. All the parties which advocate leaning towards either Russia or the West are marginal players in the Serbian political arena, implying that if you want to be appealing to the Serbian voter, your foreign policy program needs to find the balance between the EU and Russia.<sup>620</sup> One can see that the SNS gathered the minor political parties within the pre-electoral coalition and later on in the parliament. This coalition gathers a diverse list of parties, including both left and right parties and parties of national minorities.<sup>621</sup>

At the same time, the fragile Serbian democracy was on a severe downward spiral. The SNS led by Vučić began to dominate every aspect of society, political institutions, public administration, the national security apparatus and the media. As EU membership was no longer a realistic prospect, the local elites in Serbia and the Balkans were even less

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<sup>618</sup> 'Progressives win 158 out of 250 parliament seats', *B92*, 17 March 2014, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=17&nav\\_id=89670](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=17&nav_id=89670), accessed 26-06-2020

<sup>619</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, p.49

<sup>620</sup> Author's interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019; Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019; Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.241

<sup>621</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, p.47

motivated to pass reforms that would impose checks on their power and curb their interests.<sup>622</sup> In the media domain, Vučić established total dominance. By 2016, the OSCE established that independent media are “virtually non-existent.”<sup>623</sup> Beyond the national broadcaster, Vučić and the SNS have powerful media allies in the private TV stations Pink and Happy and the tabloids Kurir and Informer, through which the opposition is frequently accused of being traitors and criminals.<sup>624</sup> Beyond the growing illiberalism, the fact that any Serbian political leader can still suffer domestically if he is seen as capitulating on Kosovo also shaped Serbia’s relations with the EU. The SNS was stretched between fulfilling a promise to the West of resolving the Kosovo dispute while facing the public’s potential internal resistance.

The formal outcome of the 2016 parliamentary elections reflected a landscape of Serbian party politics that was much less friendly to the EU than the outcome of the 2014 elections. The SNS again won an absolute majority, followed by the SPS co-opted into the government, with Dačić remaining the Foreign Minister. However, the far-right, nationalist anti-EU, pro-Russian parties also gained parliamentary seats. The SRS returned to the parliament as the third-largest party in the parliament, and the coalition of DSS with Dveri, a minor nationalist party, also passed the electoral threshold.<sup>625</sup> The DS and coalition around Boris Tadić again were no match for the SNS. With pro-Russian forces back in the parliament and pro-Western opposition fragmented, Vučić can promote himself domestically and internationally as a pro-European moderniser despite the decline of Serbian democracy.<sup>626</sup> This strategy was working if one observes that after the 2016 elections, Vučić received congratulations from Johannes Hahn, the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz and other EU dignitaries.<sup>627</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Vessela Tcherneva, ‘Is the EU losing the Western Balkans?’, accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>623</sup> Tena Prelec, ‘Serbian parliamentary election 2016: A gamble that almost backfired’, *LSE EUROPP*, 26 April 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2016/04/26/serbian-parliamentary-election-2016-a-gamble-that-almost-backfired/>, accessed 19-06-2020

<sup>624</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, p.47

<sup>625</sup> Tena Prelec, ‘Serbian parliamentary election 2016’, accessed 19-06-2020

<sup>626</sup> Jovana Gec, ‘Serbia’s PM Vucic likely to solidify power in snap vote’, *The Associated Press*, 21 April 2016, <https://apnews.com/f2dc9b0146814dc6a825797cb369907b/serbias-pm-vucic-likely-solidify-power-snap-vote>, accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>627</sup> Tena Prelec, ‘Serbian parliamentary election 2016’, accessed 19-06-2020

The EU path was never something into which Vučić, his voters and his entourage ventured fully. The first reason for this was the slowing pace of the EU accession. The second reason concerns the political nature of the SNS party and its constituency, both of which evolved from the nationalist SRS. Consequently, the SNS elite did not have the European foundation at the very start.<sup>628</sup> As Dragoljub Mićunović explained in an interview with the author: “Their conversion is not so visible in the domain of ideas and ideologies as in the domain of practical politics and policies, where they have to respect promises and agreements in regards to the EU so that the EU integration of Serbia could continue, but in their ideology, practical moves, and the emotional stance, they still share those with SRS.”<sup>629</sup>

That is to say, for parties like the SNS, EU accession is not part of their sincere political conviction. Instead, EU accession is “only instrumental: a tool to secure electoral support and potentially better living standards.”<sup>630</sup> In a sense, advocating the EU path domestically, while still relevant, no longer has the game-changer effect it had in the past. Moreover, “those who do see merit in following the EU’ line’ are often seen as out-of-touch elitists promoting a foreign agenda for their own personal gain.”<sup>631</sup> The Serbian leadership ideally leveraged the fact that the EU is experiencing enlargement fatigue. As the EU stalls the process of enlargement, Vučić uses it to strengthen his illiberal rule at home without suffering any consequences from the EU, making the EU and Vučić “the perfect partners in crime.”<sup>632</sup>

Frequently, to boost nationalism with parts of the Serbian electorate and divert attention from the domestic troubles, Vučić and the SNS would scapegoat the EU, accusing it of trying to undermine the Serbian government. In June 2016, Vučić was supposed to travel to Brussels for the formal opening of EU membership talks. However, the visit was cancelled by Vučić as the pro-government media kept accusing the EU of fomenting and

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<sup>628</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>629</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’ of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>630</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, p.27

<sup>631</sup> Spyros Economides, ‘From Fatigue to Resistance’, p.13

<sup>632</sup> Author’s interview with a former high-ranking member of Boris Tadić’s Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

radicalising protests against Vučić.<sup>633</sup> Brexit also made the notion of the EU a difficult domestic sell. In the words of Dragan Šutanovac: “Some of the citizens are convinced that if the British people do not want to be in the EU, why should Serbia be in the EU.”<sup>634</sup>

The EU was still useful domestically. As democracy and the EU integration have been part of social consensus for twenty years, and as countries like Serbia are deeply connected with the EU, it is impossible to move to fully-fledged authoritarianism. So, the EU can still be used for acquiring legitimacy.<sup>635</sup> In that context, Aleksandar Vučić met with Angela Merkel in Berlin in April 2017, a couple of days before the Serbian presidential elections.<sup>636</sup>

Aleksandar Vučić easily won the elections by a landslide in the first round. The PM’s post was handed over to Ana Brnabić, Serbia’s first female and gay PM, even though everyone was aware that central power would remain in Vučić’s hands.<sup>637</sup> The appointment of Brnabić as a female and gay person was an obvious attempt by Vučić to court liberal circles in the EU and the West and to provide cover for his domestic illiberalism. Again, the relations with the EU remain a potential asset in the domestic political game. The problem remains that whenever the Serbian leadership communicates with its public on the EU, it is a technocratic narrative on issues like access to EU funds, unlike the emotional narrative on brotherhood with Russia that is more appealing to the average voter.<sup>638</sup>

The SNS government continued to play on the EU’s tendency to turn a blind eye to domestic transgression, which also worked well during late 2018 and early 2019, when the beating of an opposition politician triggered major protests on the declining rule of

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<sup>633</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, ‘Serbian TV: PM cancels visits to EU and US in protest’, *The Associated Press*, 13 June 2016, <https://apnews.com/870cd08e180b4139b9bb05be53f8914a>, accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>634</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>635</sup> Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, pp.89-90

<sup>636</sup> Darko Janjevic, ‘EU and the Balkans: Brussels’ favorite strongmen’, *Deutsche Welle*, 18 June 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-and-the-balkans-brussels-favorite-strongmen/a-39294081>, accessed 10-07-2020

<sup>637</sup> Ibid.

<sup>638</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Medak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

law and media freedom.<sup>639</sup> Neither the Western diplomats nor “their bosses in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Washington” stepped up to criticize the Belgrade government.<sup>640</sup>

However, the domestic foundation for sound policy towards the EU was also upset when it comes to the Serbian opposition. They did not articulate a clear foreign policy agenda, and many pro-EU parties who prioritise the EU are too weak, implying that the Serbian opposition cannot formulate its foreign policy program, including on the EU, that would run against the government’s blueprint.<sup>641</sup> Indeed, the EU component was weakly formulated even by the formally pro-European parties within the anti-government bloc during the protests.<sup>642</sup>

The domestic environment, in regards to the EU, transformed profoundly in 2020. As the COVID-19 pandemic reached Serbia, the government responded rigorously through a state of emergency, lockdowns, surveillance and police enforcement.<sup>643</sup> After the lockdown, Serbia held parliamentary elections in June 2020. A low turnout marked the elections as the opposition boycotted the elections, resulting in Vučić and the SNS winning a two-thirds majority in the parliament, without pro-EU opposition, leaving no doubt who is calling the shots in Serbia.<sup>644</sup> After the elections, a report came out showing that the government concealed information on the number of dead and infected to hold

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<sup>639</sup> Maja Bjeloš, ‘Two months of protests in Serbia – what’s next?’, *LSE EUROPP*, 15 February 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2019/02/15/two-months-of-protests-in-serbia-whats-next/>, accessed 04-08-2020

<sup>640</sup> Author’s interview with Zoran Živković, a former Serbian Prime-Minister and President of the New Party, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>641</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>642</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>643</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Fear drives the state’s response to COVID-19 in Southeast Europe not the import of a Chinese model’, *Ratiu Forum*, 24 April 2020, <https://ratiuforum.com/fear-drives-the-states-response-to-covid-19-in-southeast-europe-not-the-import-of-chinese-model/>, accessed 25-08-2020

<sup>644</sup> ‘Serbian parliament left without clear opposition as the ruling party wins partially boycotted elections’, *European Western Balkans*, 22 June 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/22/serbian-parliament-left-without-clear-opposition-as-the-ruling-party-wins-partially-boycotted-elections/>, accessed 25-08-2020

the elections and secure the victory.<sup>645</sup> The EU response to the controversial elections has been vague, raising the risk of augmented Euroscepticism.<sup>646</sup>

The political crisis escalated on 7 July 2020, when massive protests erupted in Belgrade due to the government's reinstating of lockdown, concealing pandemic data, and Vučić's authoritarianism, in which protesters stormed the parliament. The protests lasted several days and have spread from Belgrade to other Serbian cities frequently, with heavy clashes between protesters and the police.<sup>647</sup> During the protests, Vučić was in Paris with Macron for talks on Kosovo, making it harder for Vučić to portray himself to the EU as a liberal moderniser.<sup>648</sup>

Vučić will have to manage his relations with the EU more carefully, both in the context of his tightening grip on power in Serbia and the context of the EU being engaged in the Kosovo dialogue again. The growing Euroscepticism will also taint Serbian relations with the EU. As a result of the Serbian leadership's dubious European narrative and the slowdown in enlargement, in late 2020, 51 per cent of Serbs believed that their country should not join the EU, and 58 per cent of people think that Serbia will never enter the EU.<sup>649</sup> Vučić has and will continue to have a severe problem selling a Kosovo settlement to his domestic constituents, the same constituency he helped form by "poisoning it with nationalism", meaning he might have to "pay the price of his previous policies."<sup>650</sup> This will be the central challenge that will determine his political future.

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<sup>645</sup> Natalija Jovanovic, 'Serbia Under-Reported COVID-19 Deaths and Infections, Data Shows', *Balkan Insight*, 22 June 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/22/serbia-under-reported-covid-19-deaths-and-infections-data-shows/>, accessed 25-08-2020

<sup>646</sup> Florian Bieber, 'The Election of Losers', *European Western Balkans*, 24 June 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/24/the-election-of-losers/>, accessed 25-08-2020

<sup>647</sup> Misha Savic and Jasmina Kuzmanovic, 'A Timely Lesson in How Power Can Backfire During the Pandemic', *Bloomberg*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-11/a-timely-lesson-in-how-power-can-backfire-during-the-pandemic>, accessed 25-08-2020

<sup>648</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Belgrade's New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe', *War on the Rocks*, 28 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/belgrades-new-game-scapegoating-russia-and-courting-europe/>, accessed 07-09-2020

<sup>649</sup> Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic and Luka Steric, 'Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy', p.7

<sup>650</sup> Author's interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

### 7.3 Serbia and The United States

Serbian policy towards the US took place in a new systemic context. After the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, the US became more interested in Serbia and the Balkans by expressing concern over the Russian presence in the region, but not enough to impose change at first. Later on, the US took a more assertive stance, rolling back Russian influence in the Balkans and assuming a leading role in the Kosovo dispute. Domestically, Serbian public opinion and its hostility towards the US were a factor as always. The US's perception and the government's narrative on the US changed with Donald Trump's presidency.

#### 7.3.1 Systemic Factors

As the Ukraine Crisis changed the security landscape of Eastern Europe, and rivalry was becoming a predominant trait of US-Russia relations, Serbia continuously tried to avoid aligning itself fully with either the US or Russia. Serbia's attempt to maintain autonomy in the post-Ukraine context was perfectly encapsulated in Vučić's statement: "Serbia is neither a 'little Russia' nor a 'little America'. It makes its own decisions."<sup>651</sup>

The US slightly raised its interest in the Balkans and Serbia, but only to the extent that the region is seen as part of Eastern Europe's bigger theatre, a new theatre of rivalry with Russia. Indeed, US policy towards the region remained "reactive" and "more akin to extinguishing fires rather than just a long game of chess."<sup>652</sup> Testifying in front of the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee in February 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry said: "Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, other places. They're all in the firing line [together with] Georgia, Moldova, Transnistria."<sup>653</sup> What qualified Serbia to receive slightly increased attention from the US is its unique position as a country with European aspirations and with strong ties with Russia.<sup>654</sup> One should not overestimate US interest during this period. The US National Security Strategy issued by the Obama

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<sup>651</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.83

<sup>652</sup> Gorana Grgić, 'The Politics of Deprioritisation: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans (2001-2017)', *Paper prepared for the ISA 2019 Convention* (cited with author's permission), March 27-30, 2019, p.4

<sup>653</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.1

<sup>654</sup> Gorana Grgić, 'The Politics of Deprioritisation', p.24



administration in 2015 mentions the Balkans just once in the context of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>655</sup>

Serbia continued communicating with both the US and NATO whenever it could to keep as many doors opened for itself as possible. In late 2014, Serbia adopted the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of cooperation that a country not seeking membership can have with NATO, while the second cycle of IPAP for the period from 2019-2021 was adopted at the end of 2019.<sup>656</sup> In November 2015, Serbia hosted NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, after Vučić visited Moscow in October to negotiate arms purchases from Russia.<sup>657</sup> Before Stoltenberg's visit, Serbia ratified the status of forces agreement (SOFA), which allows NATO freedom of movement in Serbia and the use of Serbian military infrastructure.<sup>658</sup>

Bilaterally, the communications with the US also took place whenever possible, with US Vice-President Biden taking the lead. In June 2015, Vučić was to have a meeting with Biden in the White House, but the meeting was cancelled due to the death of Biden's son, Beau. Instead, Vučić met with President Obama's national security advisor Susan Rice, where the two discussed: EU integration, the Serbian need to diversify gas supplies away from Russia, and last but not least, the Kosovo dispute and the deadlock in dialogue with Priština.<sup>659</sup> Vučić and Biden did have their meeting in September 2015, with the main talking points including issues like the economy, EU integration, Kosovo and Serbia's relations with Russia.<sup>660</sup>

Biden met Vučić in Belgrade in August 2016, where the two discussed the Kosovo normalisation dialogue, regional affairs, Serbia's EU integration process and US-Serbian

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid., pp.8-9

<sup>656</sup> 'Serbia adopts new IPAP with NATO', accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>657</sup> Sasa Dragojlo, 'NATO Visit Highlights Serbia's Strategic Balancing Act', accessed 13-06-2020

<sup>658</sup> Vuk Velebit, 'Serbia and NATO: From hostility to close cooperation', *European Western Balkans*, 15 November 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/15/serbia-nato-hostility-close-cooperation/>, accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>659</sup> Igor Jovanovic, 'Vucic Claims US Backing For Serbia's EU Goals', *Balkan Insight*, 4 June 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/06/04/vucic-satisfied-with-us-support/>, accessed 15-06-2020

<sup>660</sup> Filip Avramovic, 'Serbian PM to Meet Biden on Visit to US', *Balkan Insight*, 15 September 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/09/15/serbian-pm-vucic-to-meet-with-biden-09-14-2015/>, accessed 15-06-2020

bilateral ties.<sup>661</sup> There were other bilateral meetings with US representatives, including with the US Secretary of State, John Kerry. Kerry met Ivica Dačić and Aleksandar Vučić in Washington in February and September 2015, respectively, while Kerry also visited Belgrade in December 2015 to attend the OSCE Ministerial Meeting when Serbia was chairing the OSCE.<sup>662</sup>

Over time, the US continued to show interest in Serbia in the context of the Russian presence. The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre was a frequent object of US attention. In June 2017, the then U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, Hoyt Brian Yee, testified in front of the US Senate where he referred to “the so-called humanitarian centre.”<sup>663</sup> Yee expressed concern that the humanitarian centre could be converted into a spy centre from which Russia could collect intelligence, as the city of Niš is located close to Kosovo, where NATO’s KFOR troops are located and close to a NATO member, Bulgaria. The following month, the US Embassy staff even inspected the Centre and its facilities in light of allegations that it could be converted into a spy centre.<sup>664</sup>

Due to Donald Trump’s election, the more isolationist policies he advocated, and the Russian presence, the claim of a new war in the Balkans became very popular among many observers.<sup>665</sup> However, the reality was very different, as the US under Trump acted more assertively in the Balkans. In July 2017, Vice President Mike Pence met Vučić in Washington, where the two discussed bilateral ties, the Kosovo dispute and Serbia’s EU

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<sup>661</sup> ‘U.S. VP Biden visits Belgrade’, *B92*, 16 August 2016, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=08&dd=16&nav\\_id=98921](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=08&dd=16&nav_id=98921), accessed 07-07-2020

<sup>662</sup> Gorana Grgić, ‘The Politics of Deprioritisation’, pp.24-25

<sup>663</sup> Milena Djurdjic, ‘US Sees Russia's 'Humanitarian Center' in Serbia as Spy Outpost’, *Voice of America*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-sees-russias-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost>, accessed 22-06-2020

<sup>664</sup> Maja Zivanovic, ‘US Official to Visit Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre’, *Balkan Insight*, 12 July 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/12/usa-representatives-to-visit-serbian-russian-humanitarian-centre-07-11-2017/>, accessed 22-06-2020

<sup>665</sup> Dimitar Bechev, ‘The West Needs to Call Russia’s Bluff in the Balkans’, *Atlantic Council*, 23 February 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-needs-to-call-russia-s-bluff-in-the-balkans/>, accessed 26-07-2020

aspirations.<sup>666</sup> Again, Serbia faced the same old systemic impediment of avoiding conflict with a more powerful country and the lack of sufficient interest of the US in Serbia for Serbian leaders to meet the US President, as the only person able to alter relations with Belgrade strategically. Srećko Đukić summarised that problem: “The relations reach the level of the US Secretary of State or the Vice-President, but they do not have the decisive weight in US policies; we all know who does.”<sup>667</sup>

The following month, Pence visited Podgorica where he attended the Adriatic Charter Summit with the Balkan leaders, where he attacked Russia and its regional policy: “As you all know, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force and, here in the Western Balkans, Russia has worked to destabilise the region, undermine democracies and divide you from each other and from the rest of Europe.”<sup>668</sup> The US acted on an old recipe of its Balkan policy of jumping in when the EU cannot solve local troubles. As the EU could not resolve regional crises, the US became aware that it creates a state similar to frozen conflict, making the region more susceptible to Russian influence.<sup>669</sup>

This reality became obvious when Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO in 2017 and 2020, respectively.<sup>670</sup> Before North Macedonia joined NATO, US diplomatic intervention ended the political crisis in that country that prevented the resolution of the country’s name dispute with neighbouring Greece, and a political deadlock between the government and the opposition in Albania.<sup>671</sup> Again, the US was the primary driver of these policies, showing that they are a corrective to the EU’s inability to resolve the crisis and that they are frequently a decisive factor for ending the power vacuum in the Balkans.

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<sup>666</sup> ‘Vice President Pence: USA supports Serbian efforts to join the EU’, *European Western Balkans*, 18 July 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/07/18/vice-president-pence-usa-supports-serbian-efforts-join-eu/>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>667</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>668</sup> Maja Zuvella, ‘Go West, VP Pence tells Balkan leaders’, *Reuters*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-balkans-pence/go-west-vp-pence-tells-balkan-leaders-idUSKBN1A1166>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>669</sup> Author’s interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>670</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘From Russia With Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications’, *LSE IDEAS*, Strategic Update June 2020, p.6

<sup>671</sup> Georgi Gotev, ‘Following Macedonia, Western pressure resolves Albanian crisis’, *Euractiv*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/following-macedonia-western-pressure-resolves-albanian-crisis/>, accessed 31-07-2020

Despite the reservations caused by Trump's political profile and his remarks on NATO being "obsolete" in the Balkans, his administration showed continuity in integrating the Balkans in Transatlantic structures, particularly in the context of countering Russia.<sup>672</sup>

The US tried doing the same with Serbia, as it kept expressing frustration towards Serbia due to its ties with Russia. Speaking at the 17th Serbian Economic Summit in Belgrade, at the beginning of November 2017, Yee said: "You cannot sit on two chairs, especially if they are that far away."<sup>673</sup> Ivica Dačić discounted Yee's statement: "What we do not want is that someone pulls our own chair from under us ... what is important is to see what is in our own best interest."<sup>674</sup> Two weeks later, Serbian paratroopers had four-day military exercises with their American counterparts despite Russian uneasiness, with Vučić attending the last day of drills.<sup>675</sup> Serbia was not turning its back on Russia just yet, but it was not turning its back entirely on the US either.

In November 2019, the US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter-Proliferation, Sanctions Enforcement and Regional Affairs, Thomas Zarzecki, visited Serbia and met Vučić. The following month, Vučić announced that Serbia would finalise its remaining transactions concerning arms shipments from Russia, but would stop purchasing weaponry from Moscow after that, a move motivated by fear of US financial sanctions.<sup>676</sup> This episode shows the limits of Serbo-Russian relations and that US might is the systemic force that imposes limitations on the Serbian balancing act.

As the EU continuously failed to bring about progress in the Kosovo dialogue, the US again came to the fore, and Belgrade started to perceive the US under Trump as a partner

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<sup>672</sup> Ivan Vejvoda, 'The Impact of the United States', in Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev, and Florian Trauner (eds), *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, *EU Institute for Security Studies*, Report No.36, August 2017, pp.39-41

<sup>673</sup> Filip Rudic, 'Serbian Officials Divided on Foreign Policy 'Balancing Act'', *Balkan Insight*, 24 October 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/10/24/serbian-officials-divided-over-yee-statement-10-24-2017/>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>674</sup> Aleksandar Vasovic, 'Serbian foreign minister rejects U.S. call to choose between Russia and the West', *Reuters*, 2 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-minister/serbian-foreign-minister-rejects-u-s-call-to-choose-between-russia-and-the-west-idUSKBN1D22OK>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>675</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, 'Defying Russia, Serbia holds military drills with Americans', *The Associated Press*, 17 November 2017, <https://apnews.com/721be58de30e4c97a40ab5cd4f15166b>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>676</sup> Maja Zivanovic, 'Serbia to Stop Buying Weapons, President Says', *Balkan Insight*, 3 December 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/03/serbia-to-stop-buying-weapons-president-says/>, accessed 26-08-2020

to leverage the Kosovo Albanians. The fact that the US role in the Kosovo dispute changed became obvious regarding the idea of a land swap between Belgrade and Priština. First, in August 2018, the US National Security Adviser John Bolton said in public: “Our policy, the U.S. policy, is that if the two parties can work it out between themselves and reach an agreement, we don’t exclude territorial adjustments. It’s really not for us to say.”<sup>677</sup> In December 2018, the initiative moved up to a higher level when Donald Trump sent the letter to both Vučić and Thaçi to seize a historical opportunity of reaching a peace deal. “I look forward to hosting you and President Aleksandar Vučić at the White House to celebrate what would be a historic accord,” wrote Trump to Thaçi.<sup>678</sup> Filip Ejodus commented on this episode: “It is not like that the US is coming back to the Balkans or anything like that. It is just that I think their attention has slightly increased towards this region. It is a sign of raised interest for the superpower.”<sup>679</sup> This raised interest was motivated by Trump’s desire to secure a big diplomatic win for the 2020 US presidential elections.<sup>680</sup>

This US role changed in regards to Priština’s taxes on Serbian goods. Indeed, one interviewee explained the US role: “Essentially, the United States is the only power that can influence both Kosovo Albanians and Serbia. It is the only power at all that can influence the Kosovo Albanians. So, essentially there is no other power that can influence Priština. Priština does not care about any other power.”<sup>681</sup> The sudden interest by the US in the Kosovo dispute led some to believe that while “the second league of the US politicians dealt with the Balkans since 2000”, now the focus “moves up to a higher level, and even at the table of the US President, Serbia figures as a problem”, that needs to be resolved.<sup>682</sup> This statement turned out to be true in October 2019 when Trump appointed

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<sup>677</sup> ‘Bolton Says U.S. Won’t Oppose Kosovo-Serbia Land Swap Deal’, *Radio Free Europe*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bolton-says-u-s-won-t-oppose-kosovo-serbia-land-swap-deal/29451395.html>, accessed 05-08-2020

<sup>678</sup> Andrew Gray, ‘Trump urges Kosovo to seize chance for peace with Serbia’, *Politico*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-urges-kosovo-hashim-thaci-to-seize-chance-for-peace-with-serbia/>, accessed 05-08-2020

<sup>679</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>680</sup> Dimitar Bechev, ‘Trump is looking for a foreign policy coup in the Balkans’, *Al Jazeera*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/trump-foreign-policy-coup-balkans-200304162949394.html>, accessed 07-08-2020

<sup>681</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>682</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

Richard Grenell, a US ambassador to Germany, as a special envoy for peace negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>683</sup>

In January 2019, Grenell brokered the establishment of a direct flight between Belgrade and Priština, with President Trump personally hailing the deal on Twitter.<sup>684</sup> Vučić was able to score some points with the US and Grenell. The deadlock in talks with Priština caused by constant infighting between Albanian political parties in Kosovo, which also impeded Priština in lifting tariffs against Serbia, has led the US to perceive Belgrade as the more cooperative in the normalisation talks.<sup>685</sup> This was proven in March 2020 when US diplomatic intervention led to the fall of Albin Kurti's government in Priština.<sup>686</sup> In June 2020, Priština lifted all restrictions on the import of Serbian goods.<sup>687</sup> That same month, before the planned White House meeting, Grenell got Belgrade to agree to stop its derecognition campaign regarding Kosovo and Priština to halt its campaign to gain membership in international organisations.<sup>688</sup>

As the US moved from being a champion of Kosovo Albanians to being somewhere in the middle, Belgrade saw a potential opening where the US under Trump could become a potential ally.<sup>689</sup> Vučić hoped to get a better deal under the Trump administration than from a Democratic administration, and Thaçi, on his way to political retirement, was more prepared to make a deal than any other Albanian leader in exchange for the guarantee of his safety.<sup>690</sup> As Vučić said in June: "I do not believe in big changes in American policy,

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<sup>683</sup> Judith Mischke, 'Trump names Ric Grenell his special envoy for Serbia and Kosovo', *Politico*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-names-ric-grenell-his-special-envoy-for-serbia-and-kosovo/>, accessed 25-08-2020

<sup>684</sup> 'Trump hails the initiative to restore Belgrade-Pristina commercial flights', *European Western Balkans*, 21 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/21/trump-hails-the-initiative-to-restore-belgrade-pristina-commercial-flights/>, accessed 26-08-2020

<sup>685</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of Boris Tadić's Foreign Policy Team, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>686</sup> Shaun Walker, 'Kosovans look on aghast as government falls while coronavirus bites', accessed 23-08-2020

<sup>687</sup> Dimitar Bechev, 'Serbia-Kosovo deal: Can the EU succeed where Trump failed?', accessed 24-08-2020

<sup>688</sup> 'Grenell says Serbian, Kosovo officials to meet at White House on June 27', *NI*, 15 June 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a610294/Grenell-says-Serbian-Kosovo-officials-to-meet-at-White-House-on-June-27.html>, accessed 27-08-2020

<sup>689</sup> Author's interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>690</sup> Maxim Samorukov, 'Russia-Serbia Special Relationship Is On Borrowed Time', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 24 June 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82156>, accessed 27-08-2020

but I do believe in small changes in the US policy, which would be of great importance for Serbia.”<sup>691</sup>

The Kosovo issue was brought back to the EU’s mediation due to the war crimes indictment against Thaçi, but without the US, it is hard to imagine that the EU will bring about the final resolution of the dispute. As one source prophetically said: “The only way to resolve that issue is by foreign pressure, and again we come back to America. Only American pressure can potentially resolve that issue. It is completely irrelevant if the framework of negotiations will be within the EU or outside of the EU. Of course, it can be within the EU. That is logical, but again without the American mediation, nothing is going to happen.”<sup>692</sup>

The US still has not given up on the Kosovo dispute. The day after Trump brokered a normalisation agreement between Israel and the UAE, Grenell invited Vučić and PM Hotti to a White House meeting at the beginning of September.<sup>693</sup> The meeting resulted in Vučić and Hotti signing an agreement on economic normalisation in the Oval Office in Trump’s presence. The agreement did not involve mutual recognition, but it entailed the promise of US investment. Belgrade agreed freezing its campaign of de-recognising Priština and Priština freezing its attempt to enter into international institutions for a year. However, Trump tied this Serbia-Kosovo dialogue with its Middle East policy, as both Priština and Belgrade agreed to Israel and Kosovo recognising each other while opening their embassies in Jerusalem.<sup>694</sup> Trump got the material for his re-election campaign, but his administration still has not closed the Balkans chapter.

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<sup>691</sup> ‘If Trump wins, it will be easier for Serbia’, *B92*, 28 June 2020, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=28&nav\\_id=108804](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=28&nav_id=108804), accessed 27-08-2020

<sup>692</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>693</sup> Misha Savic and Gordana Filipovic, ‘Trump Team Wades Again Into Balkan Mediation as EU Leads Efforts’, *Bloomberg*, 14 August 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-14/trump-team-wades-again-into-balkan-mediation-as-eu-leads-efforts>, accessed 27-08-2020

<sup>694</sup> ‘Trump lauds economic steps between Serbia and Kosovo’, *Al Jazeera*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/serbia-kosovo-agree-normalise-economic-ties-trump-200904163426277.html> accessed 09-05-2020



Vučić and Serbia's attempt to get closer to the US failed with Trump's electoral loss and the emergence of Joseph Biden's Presidency. As Biden was an ardent advocate of US military interventionism against Serbia in the 1990s, Serbia expects that it will not get a partnership with the US or a more beneficial settlement on Kosovo, but increased pressure from the US on the Kosovo issue instead.<sup>695</sup> Vučić will try to use with Biden's administration some of the momentum built with Trump. In his congratulatory online message to Biden, Vučić wrote: "I wish you wisdom and resoluteness to face current challenges for the benefit of America and the rest of the world. I hope we will continue the good cooperation we had with Trump with you as well, and I am grateful for that."<sup>696</sup>

The challenge for Vučić continues to be how to get the US to agree to a solution to the Kosovo issue in which Serbia is not the sole loser, and how to build a rational strategic rapprochement with the US. In trying to do so, Serbia will continue to use Russia as a diplomatic protector to balance and leverage the US.<sup>697</sup> However, overplaying the Russian card might attract precisely the type of US pressure that Serbia wants to avoid. As one Serbian diplomat said: "He [Vučić] started to get close to Moscow again before Biden gives him a slap on the wrist. However, in doing so, he risks getting a hammer on the head instead."<sup>698</sup> The US will undoubtedly remain the powerful force that Belgrade takes into account, profoundly affecting Serbian conduct.

### 7.3.2 Domestic Factors

As usual, the relations with both the US and NATO were affected by domestic hurdles. The various nationalist parties tried to use every opportunity to weaponise anti-NATO and anti-US sentiments in the public to score domestic points. In early March 2016, two minor nationalist parties, Zavetnici (Oath Keepers) and the Patriotic Movement of Serbia

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<sup>695</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Belgrade's Biden conundrum: How US-Serbian relations will shape up post-Trump', *Euronews*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/23/belgrade-s-biden-conundrum-how-us-serbian-relations-will-shape-up-post-trump-view>, accessed 15-01-2021

<sup>696</sup> 'Vucic congratulates Biden, hopes that good cooperation with US will continue', *NI*, 8 November 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a669583-vucic-congratulates-biden-hopes-that-good-cooperation-with-us-will-continue/>, accessed 15-01-2021

<sup>697</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Belgrade's Biden conundrum', accessed 15-01-2021

<sup>698</sup> Author's correspondence with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, December 2020



led by the retired police general Bratislav Dikić, organised an anti-NATO rally in Niš.<sup>699</sup> The rally was a response to Serbia's adoption of a cooperation agreement with NATO Support and Procurement Organization (NSPO), and the rally organisers demanded a referendum on NATO membership.

Vojislav Šešelj, now back from the ICTY, and the SRS organised another rally in Belgrade on 24 March 2016, exactly a month before the Serbian parliamentary elections. More importantly, the rally was marking the anniversary of the start of NATO's bombing of Serbia that also corresponded with the day that the ICTY passed its ruling in the trial of Radovan Karadžić, the wartime leader of the Bosnian Serbs. At the rally, Šešelj stressed Serbia's need to distance itself from NATO, which he called "a criminal alliance."<sup>700</sup> Even though no one in Serbia or the West is thinking of NATO membership, NATO remains a hot issue used to score domestically by major and minor Serbian nationalist parties. Consequently, the government media avoided providing a visible and detailed coverage of the military cooperation Serbia has with NATO and the US, although that cooperation is more intensive and substantive than Serbian cooperation with Russia.<sup>701</sup>

Vučić and the SNS occasionally also tended to attack the US for political purposes. In June 2016, when Vučić cancelled a trip to Brussels over tabloid assertions that the EU was organising protests in Serbia, he also cancelled a trip to the US on an inaugural Air Serbia flight to New York.<sup>702</sup> This is pure propaganda intended for domestic usage, as one can observe Vučić's tendency to switch narratives. As one source observed: "On one hand we organise manifestation of grievance against NATO, and on the other hand

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<sup>699</sup> Sasa Dragojlo, 'Anti-NATO Protesters Demand Referendum in Serbia', *Balkan Insight*, 4 March 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/03/04/serbian-rightists-protest-demanding-referendum-on-nato-membership-03-04-2016/>, accessed 17-06-2020

<sup>700</sup> 'Šešelj's Radicals rally in Belgrade', *B92*, 25 March 2016, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=03&dd=25&nav\\_id=97481](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=03&dd=25&nav_id=97481), accessed 17-06-2020

<sup>701</sup> Sasa Dragojlo, 'Serbian Army Trains More With NATO Than Russia', *Balkan Insight*, 31 August 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/08/31/serbia-s-nato-army-cooperation-beats-russia-significantly-08-30-2016/>, accessed 19-07-2020

<sup>702</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, 'Serbian TV: PM cancels visits to EU and US in protest', accessed 18-07-2020

Vučić's consultants are Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair, while he also goes to the Clinton Foundation to get a pat on the shoulder from Bill Clinton.”<sup>703</sup>

When Biden visited Belgrade in August 2016, domestic hurdles again came to the fore as nationalist tried to make a political show for domestic usage by attacking the US. During Biden's visit, hundreds of SRS sympathisers and members led by Vojislav Šešelj marched through Belgrade and chanted “Vote for Trump!”, wearing T-shirts with Donald Trump's face on them. Šešelj addressed his followers: “Trump is the alternative to globalisation. He will destroy old centers of power in the United States and he is a supporter of Russia” while calling Serbs in the US to vote for Trump in the 2016 US Presidential elections.<sup>704</sup>

However, while the US was still a domestic risk, it was also something that Vučić and his government try to use to score domestic points. These domestic points do not solely relate to securing US acquiescence to his rule, but also using relations with the US in domestic promotion. As one of Vučić's voters explained: “He is ready to cooperate with everyone, Europe, Russia, America. Anything that is good for our Serbia.”<sup>705</sup> Vučić promotes himself as an internationally respected leader, trying to assert Serbia as a partner with more powerful countries to defend the national interest.

When Donald Trump entered the White House, the situation changed further. “We should be aware that Serbia is one of the rare countries in Europe in which the victory of both George W. Bush and Donald Trump was celebrated, and in both cases for the same reasons. They are seen as Christian fundamentalists or people close to Christian fundamentalism, and Christian fundamentalists have a much more relaxed position regarding Kosovo. This position is much closer to Belgrade's views than to the Priština's views. So, whoever comes from that milieu of Christian fundamentalism in America is likely to be very popular in Serbia,” an interviewee told the author.<sup>706</sup> The rhetoric, formal

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<sup>703</sup> Author's interview with a Serbian academic and a former Serbian Ambassador, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>704</sup> Adam Taylor, ‘As Biden visits Serbia, hundreds of protesters chant ‘Vote for Trump!’’, *The Washington Post*, 9 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/16/as-biden-visits-serbia-hundreds-of-protesters-chant-vote-for-trump/>, accessed 07-07-2020

<sup>705</sup> Jovana Gec, ‘Serbia's PM Vucic likely to solidify power in snap vote’, accessed 13-07-2020

<sup>706</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

statements and media reports started revolving around the same themes that the EU-brokered talks have failed and that only the US can knock some sense into Albanians.<sup>707</sup>

As Maxim Samorukov told the author: “The United States is still emotionally perceived as the enemy by Serbian society, and there is huge mistrust, genuine mistrust, public mistrust towards the United States, and the Serbs are far more allergic to the United States than to any Europeans. But on the other hand, I have strong doubts that the conflicts that Serbia is a party to can be solved without United States help.”<sup>708</sup> Belgrade was between the systemic imperative of having an accord with the USA and the domestic impediment of long-term mistrust towards the US. The fact that a different US president was in the White House led the Serbian leadership to bypass this domestic obstacle.

This can be interpreted in several ways. First, the relations with the US became a slightly easier domestic sale in Serbia with Trump in the White House. The perception of Trump in Serbia is more favourable, as Trump, unlike previous US presidents like Clinton or Obama, is not perceived as responsible for Kosovo’s independence.<sup>709</sup> Second, by projecting these types of news into public discourse, Vučić and the SNS were preparing the Serbian public to be more receptive to any settlement on Kosovo that Vučić negotiates. Ultimately, it was another way for Vučić and his party to score domestically by promoting themselves as respectable statesmen announcing a partnership with the American superpower.

Vučić kept sending messages to his public that Serbia has the best chance to extract a less painful Kosovo settlement under Trump’s watch. As Vučić said in June: “We have ahead of us six months of a tough political struggle for our national interests in Kosovo and Metohija and for the rights of our people there ... For us, there is no happy solution there, whatever it may be. We cannot be particularly satisfied. I cannot lie to the people.”<sup>710</sup> These six months corresponded with the US presidential elections, and Vučić’s decision

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<sup>707</sup> Author’s interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>708</sup> Author’s interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>709</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>710</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Time is Gold – The Timing of the Serbian Elections’, *Ratiu Forum*, 30 June 2020, <https://ratiuforum.com/time-is-gold-the-timing-of-the-serbian-elections/>, accessed 28-08-2020

to hold Serbian elections in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic was in part motivated by the need to consolidate power ahead of tough Kosovo talks with the US.<sup>711</sup>

After the economic normalisation agreement was signed in the White House, Vučić praised Trump's role while presenting the deal as Serbia's score, and stressing that Serbia did not recognise independent Kosovo with the agreement, evidently aiming at the Serbian public.<sup>712</sup> Vučić will face the challenge to get a settlement on Kosovo with the US with all the domestic risks it entails. This challenge will be even more severe with Biden in the White House. Biden's unpopularity in Serbia will make it very difficult for Vučić to compromise on Kosovo or relations with Russia, particularly if the Serbian public perceives him as doing so under US pressure.<sup>713</sup> Domestic politics continues to be a thorn in the side of US-Serbian relations.

#### **7.4 Serbia and Russia**

The Ukrainian Crisis, in systemic terms, played a crucial role in shaping Serbian policy towards Russia. After the Ukrainian Crisis, the systemic environment became more hostile, creating the need for Serbia to maintain a balance between Russia and the West. Serbia boosted its ties with Russia to balance and play Russia and the West against each other. The Kosovo dispute remained a powerful systemic force keeping Belgrade close to Moscow. Over time, Russian influence in the Balkans declined, with the Kosovo dispute left as the last remaining element of the Serbo-Russian partnership. In domestic terms, party politics played a significant role as Belgrade could not afford to have a tough policy on Moscow, given Russia's popularity among the Serbian population. Instead, the balancing act was a way for the Serbian leadership to court both pro-Western and pro-Russian voters. The domestic vulnerability of the Serbian government to Kosovo remained an influential force in its ties with Russia.

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<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> Keida Kostreci, 'US-Brokered Serbia-Kosovo Deal a 'Step Forward' But Challenges Remain', *Voice of America*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-brokered-serbia-kosovo-deal-step-forward-challenges-remain>, accessed 05-09-2020

<sup>713</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Belgrade's Biden conundrum', accessed 15-01-2021

### 7.4.1 Systemic Factors

The Russia-West divide caused by the Ukraine Crisis was the systemic process that impacted the Serbian balancing act the most. The strategic tensions that followed the Ukrainian Crisis made the balancing act a more assiduous task. Ejodus noted that the Ukraine Crisis was a shock to which Serbia had no adequate response: “I think that Serbia in the Ukraine Crisis is really lost. When the crisis in Ukraine started, in the first few weeks you had extremely contradictory statements. I think that the country was totally lost in space.”<sup>714</sup>

For the Serbian leadership, the Ukraine Crisis indicated a multipolar order in which numerous powers compete amongst themselves. This multipolar system was supposed to be one composed of five to twenty global and regional powers and the one in which balance between the West and the East, namely Russia and China, was being established.<sup>715</sup> As one source briefly stated: “A change came along. There is a change in the worldview and the fact that on the international scene, you no longer have one power that determines all international trends.”<sup>716</sup> In the words of Slobodan Samardžić: “The Ukraine Crisis has truly polarised the world, and our leadership was completely without a response.”<sup>717</sup> The initial Serbian reaction was avoiding getting caught in a crossfire.<sup>718</sup> In this dangerous world, Serbia believed the only feasible way to protect itself was finding a balance between Russia and the West.

That Belgrade started playing a new game in regards to Russia became very apparent in October 2014. While the West was panicking over Russian actions in Ukraine, Putin was the guest of honour at a big military parade in Belgrade, marking the 70th anniversary of

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<sup>714</sup> Author’s interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>715</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>716</sup> Author’s interview with a Serbian diplomat and an adviser in the Serbian government, Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>717</sup> Author’s interview with Slobodan Samardžić, a political science professor who was Minister for Kosovo and Metohija from the DSS, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>718</sup> Author’s interview with Dimitar Bechev, Research Fellow, Center of Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina, Belgrade, March 2019

the liberation of Belgrade from Nazi occupation with the Red Army's help.<sup>719</sup> Putin also used the opportunity to throw down a gauntlet to the West. In an interview with Serbian daily "Politika", Putin took on the US and its exceptionalism by indirectly comparing it to Nazi Germany. As Putin said: "Today it is also important that people in different countries and on different continents remember what terrible consequences may result from the belief in one's exceptionality, attempts to achieve dubious geopolitical goals, no matter by what means, and disregard for basic norms of law and morality. We must do everything in our power to prevent such tragedies in the future."<sup>720</sup> As one interviewee told the author: "Putin can show that there are countries in Europe like Hungary and Serbia that he can visit. That he is not as isolated as it seems."<sup>721</sup>

For Russia, Serbia and the Balkans became a theatre where they can oppose the West at a low cost, particularly in light of the vacuum left by the deadlock in EU integrations. Indeed, the withdrawal of the EU from the Balkans coincides with the Ukrainian conflict.<sup>722</sup> The logic of the Balkans as Europe's "soft underbelly" became particularly potent after the Ukraine Crisis of 2014, as Russia became more motivated to assert itself in the Balkans and disrupt the West. This is both because Russia recognises an opening to expand its influence and because the Balkans are perceived as the place where Russia can leverage the West, primarily the EU. For Spyros Economides, the Balkans as Europe's "soft underbelly" allows Russia to expand its influence among the countries expected to become part of the West.<sup>723</sup> For Russia, opposing the EU in the Balkans and Serbia was also a way to show to the countries in the post-Soviet space, like Georgia and Moldova, that the EU path is difficult and potentially dangerous and should not be pursued.<sup>724</sup> The desire to have a potentially Russian-friendly EU member motivated Russia to be more delicate when commenting on Serbia's EU aspirations. Speaking with the Serbian press in February 2018 and in regards to the EU's enlargement strategy that

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<sup>719</sup> 'Putin guest of honour at Serbia military parade', *BBC*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29641642>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>720</sup> 'Interview to Politika newspaper', *President of Russia*, 15 October 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46806>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>721</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>722</sup> Author's interview with an MP from the ranks of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>723</sup> 'Panel I: The Balkans in Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy', accessed: 05-02-2017

<sup>724</sup> Author's interview with Filip Ejodus, professor of political science, Belgrade, February 2019

requires Serbian harmonising its foreign policy with the EU, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticised the EU for forcing Serbia to choose between Russia and the West.<sup>725</sup>

Membership of NATO was something that Russia tried to obstruct in Serbia and the Balkans more forcefully. Russia was motivated by the desire to obstruct the EU and NATO in their backyard. Russia saw this as a payback for the fact that the West was intruding on Russia's backyard in the post-Soviet space. For Bechev, this was a message to the West: "You mess in our backyard, we stir things up in yours. For every Moldova, there's a Montenegro. For every Ukraine, there is a Serbia."<sup>726</sup> Being outside the EU and NATO, Serbia was suitable for Russia's efforts to muster a response to the Ukrainian Crisis and NATO expansion in post-Soviet space.<sup>727</sup> That way, Russia gets the opportunity to obstruct the expansion of NATO and the EU in the Balkans, deterring these institutions from expanding into post-Soviet space and a chance to stop blocking that process in exchange for the West accepting Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space.<sup>728</sup>

For Serbia and other countries in the Balkans, using the notion of the Russian threat to gather support from the West became a prevalent tactic.<sup>729</sup> In a systemic and regional context, in which the Balkans were not receiving enough Western support and the relationship between Russia and the West becoming more confrontational, using Russia as leverage with the West became a default policy for Belgrade. Belgrade believed that if it leaves the impression that it has a more confident Moscow behind it, Serbia has more leverage and bargaining power in its relationship with both the US and the EU.

The security partnership has also started to gain momentum. In its public statements, Russian diplomats favoured Serbia granting diplomatic immunity to the Russian staff

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<sup>725</sup> 'Lavrov: EU, NATO wrong to force 'West or Russia' on the Balkans', accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>726</sup> Dimitar Bechev, 'Russia's Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?', *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russias-foray-balkans-really-blame/>, accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>727</sup> Author's interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>728</sup> Author's interview with Maxim Samorukov, a fellow at Carnegie Moscow Center, Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>729</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.83

within the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, drawing a direct analogy to the status that NATO has in Serbia.<sup>730</sup> Despite that, the Russian Foreign Ministry would frequently discount as “absurd” all the US concerns that the Russian-Serbian centre acts as a spy centre.<sup>731</sup> The trilateral military exercise called “Slavic Brotherhood”, which involves the Russian, Serbian and Belarusian army started to be held annually from 2015, with Serbia hosting the drill in 2016 and 2019.<sup>732</sup> The Slavic Brotherhood 2015 was a Russian provocation to the West in light of the Ukraine Crisis. The exercise involved combat against “a coloured revolution”, with a scenario involving anti-government protest turning into a riot with armed groups engaging in terrorism and political destabilisation.<sup>733</sup>

A year before, in November 2014, a bilateral counter-terrorism exercise was conducted by Serbian and Russian military, near the Serbian city of Ruma and close to the border with NATO member state Croatia. Unlike Serbian Defence Minister Bratislav Gašić, who downplayed the exercise, stating that “there is nothing special here that could be considered a sensation”, the Russian media provided theatrical and lavish coverage.<sup>734</sup> Serbia tried to keep doors open to both NATO and Russia. The Slavic Brotherhood 2015 exercise was hosted by Serbia, while NATO carried a drill “Montenegro 2016” in Serbia’s neighbouring country, a drill in which the Serbian military also participated.<sup>735</sup>

Serbia also tried to use Russia to modernise its outdated equipment originating from the days of former Yugoslavia. The Serbian air force has been the beneficiary of military cooperation with Russia, as with its outdated military hardware, it was not able to

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<sup>730</sup> Vanja Dolapčev, ‘The Bear never sleeps: The Position of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš’, *European Western Balkans*, 24 December 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/12/24/bear-never-sleeps-position-serbian-russian-humanitarian-centre-nis/>, accessed 24-06-2021; Dimitar Bechev, Rival Power, pp.187-188

<sup>731</sup> ‘Diplomat castigates US remarks against Russian-Serbian center as ‘absurd’’, *TASS*, 22 June 2017, <https://tass.com/politics/952814>, accessed 22-06-2020

<sup>732</sup> ‘Slavic Brotherhood 2019 military exercise begins in Serbia’, accessed 23-06-2020

<sup>733</sup> Roger McDermott, ‘Slavic Brotherhood 2015 Rehearses Anti-Color Revolution Operations’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12, No.160, *Jamestown Foundation*, 9 September 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/slavic-brotherhood-2015-rehearses-anti-color-revolution-operations/>, accessed 23-06-2020

<sup>734</sup> Zoran Glavonjic, ‘Belgrade Plays Down Joint Military Exercise With Russia’, *Radio Free Europe*, 14 November 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-plays-down-russia-military-exercise/26692231.html>, accessed 23-06-2020

<sup>735</sup> Dimitar Bechev, Rival Power, p.188



effectively police Serbian air space. The most important transaction has been the agreement from December 2016, when PM Vučić and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu agreed that Russia gives Serbia six MiG-29 warplanes, alongside 30 T-72S tanks, and 30 combat reconnaissance vehicles BRDM-2 armed with 14.5mm cannons.<sup>736</sup> The Serbian Defence Ministry also secured from its Russian counterparts the delivery of four Mi-17 transport helicopters and four Mi-35 attack helicopters.<sup>737</sup>

The Serbo-Russian partnership has been filled with contradictions and limitations, showing that the relationship was a simple partnership of convenience. In December 2014, Russia cancelled the South Stream project due to the EU objection.<sup>738</sup> The economic ties also showed that the partnership is limited. As stated earlier, in 2019 the EU constituted 62 per cent of Serbia's total trade.<sup>739</sup> The security partnership is no different. For Russia, the humanitarian centre in Niš, military drills and transactions involving military equipment with Serbia is a way to irritate the West and present itself as a rival power to the West. For Serbia, this was the way to maintain the pretence of military equidistance between Russia and the West.

However, the humanitarian centre is where the Serbian balancing act would break if Russia were to become more assertive in requesting diplomatic status, leading to a more vigorous Western pushback and Belgrade caught in the crossfire.<sup>740</sup> However, the humanitarian centre remains reduced to a single building with a couple of people inside. Any plan to upgrade it amounts to "political suicide" for Serbia and is nothing more than "a Cold War wet dream."<sup>741</sup> The security partnership with Moscow is also impeded by the structural factor of geography, as Serbia is encircled with NATO and EU members.

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<sup>736</sup> 'Serbia to get Russian warplanes, tanks, armored vehicles', *B92*, 21 December 2016, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=12&dd=21&nav\\_id=100019](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=12&dd=21&nav_id=100019), accessed 24-06-2020

<sup>737</sup> 'Serbia set to buy Russian attack helicopters', *B92*, 4 April 2018, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=04&dd=04&nav\\_id=103858](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=04&dd=04&nav_id=103858), accessed 24-06-2020

<sup>738</sup> 'Russia axes South Stream project', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 December 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-axes-south-stream-project/a-18104752>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>739</sup> Vladimir Medak, 'The Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia and the Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union', accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>740</sup> Emily Sherwin, 'Serbia balances between Russia and the West', *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-balances-between-russia-and-the-west/a-41854351>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>741</sup> Author's interview with Vladimir Medak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

As Srećko Đukić stated: “The only way Russia can deliver military aid to us is if they dig up a deep tunnel from the Urals to Avala (the mountain overlooking Belgrade) or from outer space.”<sup>742</sup> Serbia saw a glimpse of that in July 2019, when Romania blocked a transit of Russian secondhand tanks and armoured vehicles that Russia shipped to Serbia via the Danube River.<sup>743</sup>

Moreover, this relationship was not the altruistic partnership Belgrade and Moscow pretended to be if one looks at military drills and military equipment supplied by Moscow. Indeed, in 2019 Serbia conducted 13 military exercises with NATO members and four with Russia.<sup>744</sup> According to the document published by the Serbian Ministry of Defence containing an overview of all military donations that Serbia received between 2008 and 2018, the US was the most significant military donor, followed by China, Norway, Denmark and the UK, with Russia only being the ninth biggest donor.<sup>745</sup>

Moscow did provide the MiGs to Belgrade free of charge, but Serbia still had to pay close to USD 235 million to Russia for the assembly, repair, and refurbishing of these jets.<sup>746</sup> Serbia gets military equipment from Russia and the West, showing that it tries extracting benefits from both without leaning entirely towards either one of them. Indeed, Vučić prides himself on Russian helicopters Mi-35 and Mi-17 helicopters, but he does the same in the case of H-145M helicopters produced by the European multinational Airbus.<sup>747</sup>

Russia also has upped the ante on its soft power operations in Serbia, pushing forward pro-Russian narratives through public diplomacy, news sites and social media. The list of

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<sup>742</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

<sup>743</sup> ‘Romania Says It Blocked A Russian Arms Shipment To Serbia’, *Radio Free Europe*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-says-blocks-russian-arms-shipment-to-serbia/30077540.html>, accessed 04-08-2020

<sup>744</sup> ‘Serbia held more exercises with NATO than with Russia in 2019’, *European Western Balkans*, 18 November 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/18/serbia-held-more-exercises-with-nato-than-with-russia-in-2019/>, accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>745</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘From Russia With Love?’, pp.5-6

<sup>746</sup> ‘Serbia Takes Delivery Of First Of Six MiG-29 Fighters From Russia’, *Radio Free Europe*, 2 October 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-mig-fighter-jet-delivery-vucic/28769966.html>, accessed 24-06-2020

<sup>747</sup> ‘President Vučić attends the presentation of new helicopters of the Serbian Army’, *The President of the Republic of Serbia*, 7 December 2019, <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/news/president-vucic-attends-the-presentation-of-new-helicopters-of-the-serbian-army>, accessed 24-06-2020

issues on which Russia shapes the pro-Russian and anti-Western narrative entails, among other things: the NATO intervention in Kosovo, US wars in the Middle East, the migrant crisis, the rise of jihadism worldwide, coloured revolutions in places like Ukraine, economic neoliberalism, as well as the promotion of multiculturalism and political correctness by the EU.<sup>748</sup> As Bechev wrote: “Moscow is in a position to rally public support and exercise leverage from within domestic politics, which in turn adds to its bargaining power vis-à-vis the government of the country in question.”<sup>749</sup>

Later on, Serbia saw that Russian influence in the Balkans declined rapidly as Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO. Russia suffered another setback. In August 2018, Greece expelled Russian diplomats for communicating with political groups in Greece that opposed the settlement of name dispute with North Macedonia to sabotage the agreement and derail North Macedonian membership in NATO.<sup>750</sup> In 2018, Russian experienced a whole set of defeats, making its position in the Balkans the worst since 2008.<sup>751</sup>

However, the limits of Russian influence in the Balkans still has not forced Serbia to give up on the option of using Russia to leverage the West. In January 2019, Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade where, according to Serbian media, he was greeted by 120,000 people in front of the Orthodox Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade.<sup>752</sup> Đukić told the author that the logic behind Putin’s visit was the same as in the case of his 2014 attendance at a military parade: “These visits are both manifestational and geopolitical. That way, Belgrade is sending the message: Look! We have an alternative. We can rely on Russia.”<sup>753</sup> Belgrade pulled the same trick in October 2019 when Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev visited Belgrade. This visit was followed by the Serbo-Russian joint exercise

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<sup>748</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, pp.237-238

<sup>749</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236

<sup>750</sup> Andrew Osborn, ‘Russia expels Greek diplomats in retaliatory move’, *Reuters*, 6 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-russia-envoy/russia-expels-greek-diplomats-in-retaliatory-move-idUSKBN1KR1L2>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>751</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>752</sup> ‘120,000 Serbians welcome Putin in Belgrade’, *B92*, 17 January 2019, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=01&dd=17&nav\\_id=106015](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=01&dd=17&nav_id=106015), accessed 02-08-2020

<sup>753</sup> Author’s interview with Srećko Đukić, former Serbian diplomat and Serbian specialist on Russia and Eastern-Europe, Belgrade, January 2019

“Slavic Shield 2019”, where Russia used its S-400 air defence system and Pantsir missile battery for the first time in an exercise abroad.<sup>754</sup>

Serbian ties with Russia were still not trusting. In November 2019, a 2018 video emerged in which a Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer, stationed in the Russian embassy in Belgrade, was bribing a Serbian retired military officer.<sup>755</sup> In a sense, Vučić tried to use the situation to extract goodwill from the West for being the victim of Russian meddling and to distance himself superficially from Moscow while continuing to cooperate with Russia on an arms deal and pipeline project, the TurkStream.<sup>756</sup> Vučić met Putin in Sochi the next month to show that relations were not damaged by the spy scandal, but this was also important for Vučić as he still needed Russia on board on the Kosovo issue.<sup>757</sup>

However, this partnership is not what it used to be, as Moscow realises that Vučić’s regime is closer to the West than to Russia, and as Serbia saw Moscow’s declining clout in the Balkans. Indeed, by the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian government and media did not greet the Russian medical aid to Serbia with the same enthusiasm as China’s, showing that Belgrade was slowly replacing Moscow with Beijing as its primary non-Western partner.<sup>758</sup> In September 2020, after what Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin described as “terrible and undeserved pressure from the European Union”, Serbia cancelled the traditional military exercise with Russia and Belarus. To maintain a mirage of balance, Belgrade suspended for six months military drills with all military partners, including NATO, even though NATO and Serbia did not plan any

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<sup>754</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Why Serbia Won’t Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon’, accessed 17-11-2019

<sup>755</sup> ‘Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vucic confirms Russian spy operation after bribe video’, *Deutsche Welle*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbias-president-aleksandar-vucic-confirms-russian-spy-operation-after-bribe-video/a-51359672>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>756</sup> Maja Zivanovic, ‘Spy Scandal Tests Russian-Serbian ‘Special Relationship’’, *Balkan Insight*, 22 November 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/22/spy-scandal-tests-russian-serbian-special-relationship/>, accessed 01-08-2020

<sup>757</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘From Russia With Love?’, p.10

<sup>758</sup> Ibid.pp.3-10; Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Belgrade is embracing China as it ditches its Russian alliance’, *Reaction*, 10 July 2020, <https://reaction.life/belgrade-is-embracing-china-as-it-ditches-its-russian-alliance/>, accessed 09-06-2020

during that period.<sup>759</sup> In an attempt to reclaim some of its lost influence and prestige, the Russian Defence Ministry proposed opening a military office in Serbia to help resolve military and technical issues in Russian-Serbian cooperation.<sup>760</sup> Serbia accepted the Russian initiative, showing that it does not want to sever all ties with Russia. However, the question remains how long will Serbia be able to pursue its balancing act and its relations with Russia.

The Kosovo dispute as always acted as a powerful systemic force in relations with Russia. As the Kosovo dispute resolution with EU backing was not an easy task, Serbia still needed Russia to achieve a better deal. The SNS government tried to use Russia to get some breathing space from the West, as it became aware that it will be hard to fulfil a promise of normalisation with Kosovo. As one source stated: “When they [SNS] realised that it will not be easy to implement everything from the Brussels Agreement and that there was a lot of work to be done, they slightly turned towards Russia to show to the EU that they have another card up their sleeve.”<sup>761</sup> Later on, as Serbia became engaged in a derecognition campaign in places like Africa, the Russian diplomatic and political backing in that endeavour was also needed.<sup>762</sup> To prevent Kosovo from entering into UNESCO and INTERPOL, Serbia had to cooperate with Russia as well.<sup>763</sup>

The Ukraine crisis also made life difficult for Belgrade on the Kosovo issue. Mićunović himself stated that “The Ukraine Crisis is extremely harmful to Serbia. The referendum in the Crimea was bad news for Serbia, despite the attempts to conceal it.”<sup>764</sup> Although Ukraine does not recognise independent Kosovo, Belgrade could not support Kyiv as Belgrade needed Moscow’s veto in the UN Security Council. Also, Belgrade could not

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<sup>759</sup> ‘Serbia suspends all military exercises for six months, NATO says they did not plan any’, *European Western Balkans*, 10 September 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/10/serbia-suspends-all-military-exercises-for-six-months-they-werent-even-planned-with-nato/>, accessed 11-09-2020

<sup>760</sup> ‘Russia to open defence ministry office in Serbia in push to deepen military ties’, *Reuters*, 20 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-serbia/russia-to-open-defence-ministry-office-in-serbia-in-push-to-deepen-military-ties-idUSKBN2751SA>, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>761</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>762</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>763</sup> Author’s interview with Tanja Mišćević, a political science professor, Belgrade, May 2019

<sup>764</sup> Author’s interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, former Chairman of the Serbian Parliament and former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’ of Serbian parliament, Belgrade, January 2019

support Western opposition to the annexation of Crimea when most Western countries recognised Kosovo's independence.

What made the Serbian balancing act extremely complicated was that Russia frequently made analogies between Crimea and Kosovo. In March 2014, Putin said: "In a situation absolutely the same as the one in Crimea they [the West] recognised Kosovo's secession from Serbia as legitimate, arguing that no permission from a country's central authority for a unilateral declaration of independence is necessary."<sup>765</sup> In 2016, in an interview with Bloomberg, Putin went even further by invoking the ICJ's advisory opinion on Kosovo from 2010 to justify a Crimean referendum on joining Russia.<sup>766</sup>

On the Kosovo front, Serbo-Russian relations became more complicated when the idea of a land swap came into circulation. Vučić visited Moscow in October 2018 trying to secure Putin's support for the idea of the land swap and possible recognition of Kosovo, but "was given the cold shoulder", and Putin's visit to Belgrade initially scheduled for November 2018 was postponed.<sup>767</sup> The cold shoulder was because Putin did not want the Kosovo dispute to be resolved in a way that excludes Russia and denies Russia the opportunity to ask something in return in the great power bargaining with the West, primarily the US.<sup>768</sup>

When Putin visited Belgrade in January 2019, Serbia's challenge was to have Putin agree to a Kosovo settlement. Russia knew that a Kosovo dispute resolution leaves Russia without influence and leads Serbia to tilt towards the West.<sup>769</sup> Međak said that Russia would not give up on the Kosovo asset for free: "In the Western Balkans, Russia has no military forces, but it has political influence via the UN Security Council. It is a clear

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<sup>765</sup> Bojana Barlovac, 'Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession', *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/18/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin/>, accessed 05-07-2020

<sup>766</sup> 'Putin Discusses Trump, OPEC, Rosneft, Brexit, Japan (Transcript)', *Bloomberg*, 5 September 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-05/putin-discusses-trump-opec-rosneft-brexit-japan-transcript>, accessed 19-07-2020

<sup>767</sup> Maxim Samorukov, 'Why is Russia Hooked on the Kosovo Conflict?', *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, Issue No.2, 2019, p.60

<sup>768</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'From Russia With Love?', p.8

<sup>769</sup> Maxim Samorukov, 'Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 22 January 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78173>, accessed 05-09-2020

shot. Why would Russia miss a clear shot? You never know when you might cash that clear shot for something else.”<sup>770</sup> The question remains unanswered. As Vučić kept engaging the US on Kosovo, he still tried to have Russian support. On 18 June 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Serbia, and six days later, Vučić visited Moscow to attend the postponed Victory Parade marking the Soviet victory in World War II, corresponding with Vučić trying to resolve the Kosovo issue with Grenell.<sup>771</sup> However, Serbia was still distancing itself from Russia.

Starting with July 2020 protests in Serbia, and alongside Vučić meeting Macron and Merkel in Paris, the pro-government tabloids and media began accusing pro-Russian, anti-EU right-wingers of fomenting protests to derail Vučić and his attempt to resolve the Kosovo issue under Western guidance. This was done to court the West by creating a false perception of the Russian threat. The Russian Ambassador in Serbia kept denying the allegations, but it is evident that Serbia is willing to scapegoat Russia to muster Western support.<sup>772</sup> When Vučić met Trump in the White House, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, caused ire amongst Serbian officials when she compared photos from the meeting with the scenes from the erotic thriller “Basic Instinct.”<sup>773</sup> While the Russian side apologised, it remains clear that Serbo-Russian ties are past their prime and that Russia was not happy that Serbia was following the US lead on Kosovo and degrading Russian influence in the process.

The Kosovo issue will continue to affect Serbian balancing until it is resolved. Indeed, in September 2020, after the White House meeting with Trump, Vučić had a telephone conversation with Putin in which Vučić still talked of Serbia as a partner of Russia. Regarding Kosovo, Putin stated that “Russia had not changed its position in searching for a balanced and compromise solution acceptable to Belgrade which should be verified by

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<sup>770</sup> Author’s interview with Vladimir Medak, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>771</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics’, accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>772</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Belgrade’s New Game’, accessed 07-09-2020

<sup>773</sup> ‘Zakharova compares Vucic's meeting with Trump to scene from ‘Basic Instinct’’, *N1*, 6 September 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a636875/Zakharova-compares-Vucic-s-meeting-with-Trump-to-scene-from-Basic-Instinct.html>, accessed 07-09-2020



the UN Security Council.”<sup>774</sup> Putin flashed his veto in the Security Council, sending a message that Kosovo is an asset that Russia will not renounce unless the US gives something in return. However, suppose the US decides to indulge Russia and engage in a great power bargain on Kosovo with Putin. In that case, the Kosovo issue is “out in the orbit where Serbia has no saying.”<sup>775</sup> In that case, Serbia will again become the casualty of the cruel realities of the international system.

In the meantime, Serbia will still be forced to keep Russia around. The emergence of the Biden Presidency and the pressure that Serbia expects from Washington regarding Kosovo has forced Belgrade to perform a partial repivot towards Moscow. In December 2020, Serbia voted against the UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to end the “temporary occupation” of Crimea as soon as possible.<sup>776</sup> Through this vote, Serbia and Vučić were getting closer to Russia to get protection from Biden and the US.<sup>777</sup> Soon after, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Belgrade, where he met with Vučić to discuss Kosovo, the TurkStream project and bilateral ties.<sup>778</sup>

Lavrov’s visit showed that Serbia still tried to extract benefits from cooperating with Russia while using Russia to extract concessions from third parties, primarily the West. After meeting with Lavrov, Vučić commented on the Turkstream project by saying Serbia is ready to import gas from all sources but that no one offered a better price than Moscow.<sup>779</sup> A cunning statement where Vučić praised cooperation with Russia while also sending a message to outsiders that he is willing to hear them if they have a better offer.

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<sup>774</sup> ‘Vucic to Putin: Serbia remains true Russian partner; No mention of Putin’s visit’, *NI*, 10 September 2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a638341/Vucic-to-Putin-Serbia-remains-true-Russian-partner.html>, accessed 11-09-2020

<sup>775</sup> Author’s interview with Boško Jakšić, Serbian foreign policy commentator Belgrade, March 2019

<sup>776</sup> ‘RFE: Serbia votes against UN resolution on Crimea’, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>777</sup> Author’s correspondence with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, December 2020

<sup>778</sup> ‘Russian FM arrives in Belgrade; talks to include bilateral relations, economy’, *NI*, 15 December 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a683763-russian-fm-arrives-in-belgrade-talks-to-include-xxxxx/>, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>779</sup> Radomir Ralev, ‘Serbia to start pumping gas into Balkan Stream by Dec 30 - Vucic’, *SeeNews*, 16 December 2020, <https://seenews.com/news/serbia-to-start-pumping-gas-into-balkan-stream-by-dec-30-vucic-724857>, accessed 16-01-2021



Even the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines fits into the rubric of Serbia repivoting towards Russia. At the end of December, Serbia took delivery of the first batch of Russian made Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>780</sup> Beyond the health necessity, purchasing vaccines from Moscow was a way for Belgrade to court Moscow and leverage the West.<sup>781</sup> The Serbo-Russian partnership has been significantly downgraded, and it can be said that it is a “partnership past its prime”, but it is not a terminated partnership.<sup>782</sup> As long as Serbia needs Russia on Kosovo and lacks strategic accommodation with the West, Russia will remain a factor in Belgrade’s policy thinking.

#### 7.4.2 Domestic Factors

The logic of political survival has been a major force impacting Belgrade’s desire to engage Moscow more assertively. Apart from the more pragmatic Vučić and pro-Russian figurehead Nikolić, Ivica Dačić was one of the more effective voices in the pro-Russian camp of the Serbian political hierarchy, even advocating for granting diplomatic status to Russian staff at the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš.<sup>783</sup> The ruling coalition gathered around the SNS to this very day brings together a large grouping of minor political parties, some of which never participated in the elections independently. Even though these minor political parties do not contribute to the electoral rating and success of the SNS, they are co-opted into the ruling coalition to extend the political front to include both pro-Russian and pro-Western figures and groups by his side.<sup>784</sup>

The main reason why Serbian leaders decided to play the Russian card in domestic politics post-2014, even more powerfully than before, was the high popularity of Russia

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<sup>780</sup> Radomir Ralev, ‘Serbia receives first batch of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine’, *SeeNews*, 30 December 2020, <https://seenews.com/news/serbia-receives-first-batch-of-russias-sputnik-v-coronavirus-vaccine-726335>, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>781</sup> Richard Lloyd Parry and Hannah Lucinda Smith, ‘China embarks on campaign of Covid vaccine diplomacy’, *The Times*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-embarks-on-campaign-of-covid-vaccine-diplomacy-2739zdrnd>, accessed 24-06-2021

<sup>782</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Russia and Serbia: A Partnership Past its Prime’, *Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI)*, 23 September 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-and-serbia-partnership-past-its-prime>, accessed 16-01-2021

<sup>783</sup> ‘Is Dacic “Russian man” - and how he earned “Putin’s medal”’, *B92*, 31 January 2018, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=01&dd=31&nav\\_id=103392](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=01&dd=31&nav_id=103392), accessed 19-06-2020

<sup>784</sup> Author’s interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

and Putin in Serbia. For example, in January 2018, Putin was the most popular foreign leader in Serbia, with 80 per cent of Serbians showing sympathy.<sup>785</sup> The Serbian public started to perceive Russia as Serbia's main protector, irrespective of the lack of deep substance in the Serbo-Russian relationship, so Serbian leaders could not join the anti-Russian policies of the West.<sup>786</sup>

The Serbian leadership is also faced with a strong political symbolism of the 1990s that distinguishes people as patriots and traitors. In that context, "whoever opposes Russia openly is very likely to be seen as a traitor by major parts of the population. So, if you want to win elections, you are not going to do that."<sup>787</sup> Naturally, Serbia's democratic backsliding also helped the Serbian balancing act as the Russian factor became a way of deterring the EU from openly attacking the declining state of democracy in Serbia.<sup>788</sup> As one source said: "The benefit that Serbian leadership expects is to avoid being destabilised by foreign factors, either from the West or from the East. Tadić followed the European path only to be betrayed by Germany, which revoked its support."<sup>789</sup>

The domestic vulnerability of the Serbian leadership to the issue of Kosovo also re-energised the Russian factor. Ivo Visković explained to the author that the SNS and Vučić are engaged in "foreign policy for domestic usage" or "foreign policy in the function of domestic politics" as there is the "Sword of Damocles" hanging over the ruling elites in the form of the Kosovo dispute. As Visković said: "Everyone knows that it cannot be resolved in a way that is good for Serbia, and no one wants to assume full responsibility because they are aware that they can lose a lot as a result. That is the game. In that type of situation, Russia appears as a sort of *deus ex machina*, as some form of a saviour."<sup>790</sup> As it was said to the author: "The position of political elites in Serbia regarding Kosovo is very insincere. Actually, political elites do not care about Kosovo. It is absolutely all

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<sup>785</sup> 'Putin remains most popular foreign politician in Serbia - opinion poll', TASS, 11 January 2018, <https://tass.com/politics/984549>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>786</sup> Maxim Samorukov, 'Why is Russia Hooked on the Kosovo Conflict?', p.60

<sup>787</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>788</sup> Author's interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>789</sup> Author's Interview with a high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, July 2019

<sup>790</sup> Author's interview with Ivo Visković, a political science professor and former Serbian ambassador, Belgrade, February 2019

the same to them if Kosovo were a part of Serbia or Mongolia. The only reason they mention it is that they are afraid of public opinion.”<sup>791</sup>

Vučić, being aware of this reality, started playing the Russian card to gain an advantage for himself and his party by showing his electorate that he has Moscow’s support and that he is willing to promote cooperation with Russia. In March 2014, Vučić visited Moscow between the parliamentary elections and him becoming the new PM, establishing a practice of interstate visits with Russia that correspond with Serbian electoral cycles.<sup>792</sup> The invocation of Orthodox Christianity and brotherhood with Russia is Vučić pleasing pro-Russian voters as “what you do with others worldwide, you have to present it to your market, to your constituents,” in the words of former Serbian PM Zoran Živković.<sup>793</sup>

In November 2014, two Serbian MPs from the ranks of the SNS acted as observers during elections organised by the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. While the two MPs claimed to have visited Donetsk and Lugansk in a private capacity, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry summoned the Serbian Ambassador in Kyiv due to this issue.<sup>794</sup> Serbian politicians proved they could be even more provocative in invoking nationalism and Russophilia to promote themselves domestically. The delegation led by the new president of the DSS, Sanda Rašković-Ivić and the president of Dveri, Boško Obradović, in October 2015 visited Crimea and met the Crimean Prime Minister and members of the Crimean regional legislature.<sup>795</sup> Obradović took the scandal to a whole new level when he responded to Ukraine’s protest over his visit to Crimea. “In my response, I said for us Crimea is part of Russia just like Kosovo is a part of Serbia. In this case, we do not agree with the position of our government. We think that it is like this. The position of our government is disrespectful toward Russia’s territorial integrity.”<sup>796</sup>

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<sup>791</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>792</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics’, accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>793</sup> Author’s interview with Zoran Živković, a former Serbian Prime-Minister and President of the New Party, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>794</sup> ‘Serbian ambassador summoned by Ukrainian MFA’, *B92*, 5 November 2014, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=11&dd=05&nav\\_id=92143&version=amp](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=11&dd=05&nav_id=92143&version=amp), accessed 18-06-2020

<sup>795</sup> ‘Members of Serbian parliament to meet with Crimean Prime Minister, legislature speaker’, *TASS*, 27 October 2015, <https://tass.com/world/831930>, accessed 18-06-2020

<sup>796</sup> ‘Serbian delegates say they recognize Crimea part of Russia’, *TASS*, 27 October 2015, <https://tass.com/world/832067>, accessed 18-06-2020

Public opinion and the media landscape have also helped the Serbian balancing act. While Russian soft power operations have been mentioned earlier, these should not be exaggerated. Despite the talks in 2015 that *RT* (formerly Russia Today) would start to broadcast its program in Serbian,<sup>797</sup> it has not happened to this very day. This implies the strong influence of local agency rather than purely Russian induced media content.<sup>798</sup> As Šutanovac said: “There are Serbian media that for some time now are engaged in the campaign against the EU, convincing the citizens that the EU is collapsing or that it is on the verge of collapsing, while the Eurasian Union or the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are thriving, making the future that Serbia should be a part of.”<sup>799</sup> This media landscape was also pronounced in the coverage of the Serbo-Russian military partnership that received greater and more favourable coverage than the more developed collaboration with the West, calibrated to Russia’s popularity in Serbia and intended as a PR boost for Vučić.<sup>800</sup>

As the 2016 parliamentary elections were approaching, the situation looked very good for Russia when it comes to its place in the Serbian party arena. During the SRS rally on 24 March 2016, Šešelj told his supporters that Serbia must decide between Russia and the EU, whose members are “traditional enemies” of Serbia.<sup>801</sup> The election results were also good for Moscow as the Russia-friendly parties entered the parliament in both the ruling coalition and the opposition.

After winning the Serbian parliamentary elections in May 2016, Vučić visited Moscow, where he met with Putin.<sup>802</sup> In June 2016, at the time when Vučić was cancelling his trips to Brussels and New York, Russia insisted that the SPS and Dačić remain in the ruling coalition with Vučić due to their openly pro-Russian stance.<sup>803</sup> The DSS and Dveri, who were now in Parliament, and the SNP led by Nenad Popović, now a coalition partner of

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<sup>797</sup> ‘Russia Today Starts Broadcasts From Serbia’, *Balkan Insight*, 1 January 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/01/01/russia-today-starts-broadcast-on-belgrade-radio/>, accessed 25-06-2020

<sup>798</sup> ‘Balkan Media Scene and Russian Influence’, *European Security Journal*, 30 January 2019, <https://www.esjnews.com/balkan-media-scene>, accessed 31-07-2020

<sup>799</sup> Author’s interview with Dragan Šutanovac, former Serbian Defence Minister, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>800</sup> Author’s interview with former, high-ranking member of G17 Plus, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>801</sup> ‘Šešelj’s Radicals rally in Belgrade’, accessed 17-06-2020

<sup>802</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics’, accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>803</sup> Dusan Stojanovic, ‘Serbian TV: PM cancels visits to EU and US in protest’, accessed 18-07-2020

the SNS, attended the congress of United Russia in Moscow in June 2016, Putin's party and the ruling party in Russia. On that occasion, these parties signed with United Russia a declaration directed against NATO expansion in the region as the signatories agreed to work on "establishing militarily neutral, sovereign states in Southeast Europe."<sup>804</sup>

The pro-Russian elements in Serbian domestic politics are also being used by the Serbian leadership in its balancing act, as it tries to leverage the West. Namely, Vučić and his entourage could always present themselves to the US and the EU as moderate, pro-European reformers surrounded domestically by the pro-Russian opponents who would turn Serbia towards Russia unless the West gives support to Vučić's rule.<sup>805</sup> As Bechev wrote: "when there is a geopolitical challenger, the West's focus shifts from transformation to stability. That is why the EU, as well as the U.S., seems prepared to cut some slack for Balkan leaders to ensure they don't fall into Russia's lap. The scarier Putin is, the more leeway Balkan wannabe-Putins have."<sup>806</sup>

In 2017 another domestic reshuffling took place. As Serbia was preparing for the presidential elections, Vučić and the SNS were going for the option of Vučić running for the post as he was deemed to be the most powerful and popular politician whose victory was inevitable. Eventually, Nikolić had to step aside and let Vučić run. Nikolić was left to lead the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, a body formed especially for Nikolić as a sinecure and pay-off for not running.<sup>807</sup> Again, a more pragmatic Vučić prevailed over the pro-Russian Nikolić.<sup>808</sup> A couple of days before his presidential win, Vučić met Putin in Moscow once again.<sup>809</sup> Vučić saw Putin the same way he met Angela Merkel to promote himself as leader respected internationally and win both pro-European and pro-Russian voters.

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<sup>804</sup> 'Serbian parties sign declaration with United Russia', *B92*, 29 June 2016, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=06&dd=29&nav\\_id=98469](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=06&dd=29&nav_id=98469), accessed 26-06-2020

<sup>805</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.83

<sup>806</sup> Dimitar Bechev, 'Russia's Foray into the Balkans', accessed 28-07-2020

<sup>807</sup> Milan Simurdić, 'Could Ex-President Nikolic be Serbia's Comeback Kid?', *Balkan Insight*, 25 June 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/25/could-ex-president-nikolic-be-serbia-s-comeback-kid-06-22-2018/>, accessed 24-08-2020

<sup>808</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power*, p.83

<sup>809</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics', accessed 18-07-2020

Vučić continued using the Russian factor in the domestic political struggle during Putin's January 2019 visit. However, by this point, it was evident that he was not sincerely close with Putin and Russia the way Nikolić and Dačić were.<sup>810</sup> Vučić scored with this visit as he showed his ability to counter mass protests by organising a big rally for Putin.<sup>811</sup> The visit did show that Moscow did not perceive Vučić as a pro-Russian leader, as Putin addressed the crowd with a simple "Thank you for your friendship" in Serbian and Russian, after foot-dragging and persistent pleas from Serbian hosts.<sup>812</sup> However, the central challenge for Vučić remained the risky prospect of Putin sabotaging any Kosovo settlement that Vučić negotiates, as this would lead to Vučić's political downfall, as most Serbs would perceive this situation as Putin being firmer on Kosovo than Vučić.<sup>813</sup>

Many opposition leaders tried to weaponise the Kosovo issue and relations with Russia to counter Vučić's dominance. However, for some of the sources, the pro-EU parties care even less about Kosovo than Vučić. Still, they are engaged in the policy to stay competitive, creating discrepancies between what they say in public and what they believe.<sup>814</sup> During the 2019 protests, the idea of using pro-Russian sympathies in Serbian public opinion to unite anti-Vučić forces and try to steal the SNS votes, particularly as the EU narrative no longer had the same pull, was very much present.<sup>815</sup>

This tactic never worked for the opposition, but Vučić still used the Russia card. In October 2019, Vučić used Medvedev's visit for domestic promotion as Medvedev attended a military parade marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of Belgrade's liberation from Nazi occupation, and as Russia used the powerful S-400s in a military exercise.<sup>816</sup> In June 2020, when Lavrov visited Belgrade and when Vučić went for a parade in

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<sup>810</sup> Author's interview with Ivan Vejvoda, a Permanent Fellow at the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences, and a past adviser to several Serbian officials, Belgrade, March 2019; Author's interview with Zoran Lutovac, a former Serbian Ambassador and President of the DS, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>811</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon', accessed 17-11-2019

<sup>812</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'From Russia With Love?', p.9

<sup>813</sup> Maxim Samorukov, 'Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace', accessed 05-09-2020; Vuk Vuksanovic, 'From Russia With Love?', p.10

<sup>814</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Foreign Policy Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2019

<sup>815</sup> Author's interview with Srđan Bogosavljević, a consultant of Ipsos, a market research agency Belgrade, April 2019

<sup>816</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon', accessed 17-11-2019

Moscow, these visits were timed for the period before and after the parliamentary elections to show the SNS voters that Vučić still enjoys Russian support, especially on Kosovo.<sup>817</sup>

However, Vučić is aware that Russian popularity can be a domestic trap as well. Vučić and his media avoided naming Putin as complicit in alleged subversive actions against the Belgrade regime during the July 2020 protests. However, the anti-Russian rhetoric was a way for Vučić to suppress any future pro-Russian backlash in Serbia against the agreement with Priština.<sup>818</sup> Vučić will still play the Russian card carefully given the unresolved Kosovo dispute and Russian popularity among the Serbs, where forty per cent of Serbs in late 2020 perceived Russia as Serbia's best friend.<sup>819</sup> That became evident in October 2020 when Vučić announced that SPS would be part of the new government led by Ana Brnabić and Ivica Dačić, taking over as parliament speaker.<sup>820</sup>

The SPS was proof that Russian influence in Serbia was downgraded but not eliminated. Dušan Bajatović, a pro-Russian cadre of the SPS, who remained the general director of Srbijagas, the state-owned natural gas provider, was the target of public contempt by Zorana Mihalović, the Western-leaning Energy Minister and Deputy PM.<sup>821</sup> Despite these frictions, the SPS, Dačić and Bajatović were still around, and so are the Russians. The declining status of SPS in the Serbian government coalition reflects the scaling down in Russian influence. However, as long as the SPS is still in the government, even in a diminished capacity, Russia is not out of the picture.

Serbian leadership continues to use Russia as a tool of domestic legitimacy. During Lavrov's December 2020 visit to Belgrade, he and Vučić visited the fully renovated Saint Sava Cathedral, partly financed by Russia, and the two laid flowers on the grave of

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<sup>817</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics', accessed 18-07-2020

<sup>818</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, 'Belgrade's New Game', War on the Rocks, accessed 07-09-2020

<sup>819</sup> Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic and Luka Steric, 'Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy', p.12

<sup>820</sup> 'Vučić: SNS, SPS and SPAS will form the new government in Serbia, early parliamentary elections in April 2022', *European Western Balkans*, 21 October 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/21/vucic-sns-sps-and-spas-will-form-the-new-government-in-serbia-early-parliamentary-elections-in-april-2022/>, accessed 17-01-2021

<sup>821</sup> 'Srbijagas director removed from meeting with minister for "disrespecting" govt.', *NI*, 31 October 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a666982-srbijagas-director-removed-from-meeting-with-minister-for-disrespecting-govt/>, accessed 17-01-2021



Serbian Patriarch Irinej, who had died of COVID-19 the previous month.<sup>822</sup> The acquisition of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V by Serbia is also a way to court pro-Russian parts of the Serbian electorate.<sup>823</sup> The conclusion is self-evident: Russia continues to be a factor in Serbian domestic politics that will undoubtedly affect Belgrade's foreign policy in the future. The domestic sensitivity to the unresolved Kosovo dispute and the temptation to use the Russian card to score domestically will ensure that.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter showed the final and most essential stage in the Serbian balancing act, a period when the balancing act between Russia and the West was at the highest intensity and highly unpredictable as Serbia constantly readjusted its behaviour depending on the circumstances. This was the product of a particular combination of systemic and domestic forces prevalent during the designated period.

Regarding the systemic factors, the old casual forces of the power vacuum and the unresolved Kosovo dispute remained in play. The Ukraine Crisis and the rivalry between Russia and the West that followed exacerbated these systemic trends. The power vacuum came as the EU's attention became even less focused on the Balkans, decreasing the incentive for Belgrade to follow the EU's lead in its foreign policy. In those circumstances, the other powers were able to play a more active role. As the Ukraine Crisis transformed Russia's relations with the West, the Balkans became a fertile terrain where Russia could oppose the West at a low cost, and the power vacuum in the Balkans enabled it to do so.

In that context, Serbia embraced its balancing act more openly to avoid being sucked into the great power rivalry, turning this rivalry into an asset where it could balance and pit West and Russia against each other to extract concessions from both. Naturally, the issue of Kosovo was also a powerful systemic determinant. While the EU's ability to handle

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<sup>822</sup> 'President Vucic and Minister Lavrov in Saint Sava Cathedral', *Serbian Orthodox Church*, 15 December 2020, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/president\\_vucic\\_and\\_minister\\_lavrov\\_saint\\_sava\\_cathedral](http://www.spc.rs/eng/president_vucic_and_minister_lavrov_saint_sava_cathedral), accessed 17-01-2021

<sup>823</sup> Richard Lloyd Parry and Hannah Lucinda Smith, 'China embarks on campaign of Covid vaccine diplomacy', accessed 16-01-2021



the Kosovo dispute diminished, Belgrade wanted to use Moscow to extract a better settlement on Kosovo.

The US changed its posture towards Serbia after Ukraine in 2014, as the Russian factor caused the US to pay more attention to Serbia and the Balkans. The systemic environment changed as the US suppressed Russian influence in the Balkans. Serbia also engaged differently with the US as it became more active in resolving the Kosovo dispute. Ultimately, the limits of Russian power and the mistrust and dysfunctionality in Serbo-Russian relations came to the surface. However, Russia will remain a factor as long as the Kosovo issue is unresolved. This notion is vindicated with Joseph Biden's ascendance as the new US President, prompting Serbia to get close to Russia once again.

Domestically, the party politics in Serbia played its role. The sensitivity to the Kosovo issue and the Russian popularity in Serbia forced the Serbian leadership, balanced internationally, to win votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbs. Given the Serbian government's increasingly illiberal character, Serbian leadership used the balancing act to gain acquiescence from the external powers. While the EU and the US were occasionally the targets of government propaganda, they were also tools of domestic regime legitimisation, while the government frequently courted pro-Russian sentiments. The rhetoric on the US changed as the US under Trump became a more acceptable partner for the Serbian government and as Russian popularity became an obstacle in resolving the Kosovo issue. However, Russia remains extremely popular with the Serbian public, and the unresolved Kosovo dispute is highly salient for Serbian citizens, forcing Serbian politicians to employ the Russian factor in their domestic competition. Serbian party politics continues to be an unavoidable part of the causal equation.

## **CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter is the conclusion that will summarise and revisit the argument in regards to the puzzle and the research question. The conclusion will revisit the research methodology undertaken and why NCR was chosen as the analytical framework. The main arguments and findings will be briefly restated. Afterwards, the contribution that this thesis makes to NCR literature, Balkan scholarship, and general IR will also be presented. Ultimately, avenues for future research will also be provided as other theoretical traditions can profit from studying cases like Serbia.

### **8.2 Research Methodology and Analytical Framework Revisited**

As with any scientific research, the starting point was defining a puzzle and coming up with a research question from that puzzle. The research began with an inductive approach of selecting a case and defining the timespan of that case study. The case of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West represented a puzzle in itself. Why did Serbia decide to do geopolitical balancing instead of aligning itself fully with the West? Serbia is a small country with insufficient capabilities to operate with that much leeway vis-à-vis more powerful players like the EU, the US and Russia. For a country that is still burdened with the legacy of the 1990s when it was deemed a pariah by the West, is it not risky to encourage perception in the West of Serbia being Russia's proxy? Would it not be easier for Serbia to follow the footsteps of its neighbours who pursue pro-Western policies?

The research question is why is Serbia conducting this balancing act, which involves maintaining close ties with Russia, the pursuit of EU membership, and a working relationship with the US, and what factors explain variations in that balancing during different periods? The period between 2008 and 2020 is selected, as 2008 marks the beginning of the Serbian balancing act. The 12 years that ensued provide a long enough period to analyse Serbian policy and determine causality and its empirical phases.

Upon selecting the case, the research embarked on an empirical process tracing, whose purpose was to put the cause (independent variable) and outcome (dependent variable) in sequential order. The process tracing was done by analysing primary and secondary reading material and then through empirical fieldwork research in Serbia. During the fieldwork, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 local sources in Serbia. The research established systemic pressures that generated the Serbian balancing act and its variations during the designated period. However, the research also established a strong domestic force of Serbian party politics that determined how Serbia responded to these pressures.

Based on this finding, it was possible to formalise the theoretical framework and use NCR as the analytical framework that provides the best causal mechanism to organise the empirical data collected in the research logically and systematically. That is to say, an analytical framework that considers both domestic and systemic factors was needed. More importantly, the research needed an analytical framework that deals with the foreign policy outcomes of individual states.

NCR is the most novel form of realist theory, and it was first coined by Gideon Rose back in 1998. By including domestic forces in its paradigm, NCR reconciles *Innenpolitik* tradition with the realist systemic approach that gives causal primacy to international systemic pressures. Equally important is that NCR reconciles two previous versions of realism, classical realism and neorealism. NCR keeps the theoretical and scientific rigour of neorealism and integrates it with the more context-salient approach of classical realism that emphasises the study of statesmanship.

In its causal mechanism, NCR has three variables: the independent variable, the intervening variable and the dependent variable. The intervening variable represents the international systemic pressures that act as a causal force. Like all versions of realism, NCR emphasises the international system's primacy in determining the states' behaviour. Occasions where the states behave solely according to the domestic rationale without any international systemic effects are infrequent.<sup>824</sup> All states are susceptible to international

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<sup>824</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p.3

systemic pressures, and the research established that the Serbian balancing act is no exception. The systemic pressures that act as the independent variable are the Kosovo dispute, the power vacuum in the Balkans, and the state of relations between Russia and the West. The last one does not cause the Serbian balancing act, but it determines its form and intensity at various stages. The dependent variable is the foreign policy behaviour of an individual state that responds to the pressures generated by the international system.

As Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro noted, there are three versions of NCR: NCR as the explanation of anomalies of neorealism; as a theory of foreign policy; and most recently as a theory of IR.<sup>825</sup> The last version does not apply to this study, but NCR is used to address a foreign policy puzzle and analyse the foreign policy outcome. Based on that premise, this study relied on two general themes of NCR; the first is that not all states respond to the systemic pressures in the same way, and the second is that domestic politics are a factor in the causal mechanism. States do not respond identically to systemic pressures because of the influence of domestic factors.

It is these domestic factors that act as the intervening variable, where it is a filter through which systemic pressure gets translated into a foreign policy outcome. The use of an intervening variable in the causal analysis gives NCR an edge in analysing individual policies, like the Serbian balancing act. The research identified Serbian party politics as the intervening variable affecting the Serbian balancing act. Most of NCR's critics point out that it lacks theoretical parsimony because researchers employing the theory selectively choose intervening variables in an *ad hoc* manner depending on the individual case study. To make NCR more generalisable, theoretically, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell introduced leader's images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions as elements that fall into the category of intervening variables within the NCR lexicon.<sup>826</sup>

Serbian party politics was determined to be an all-inclusive factor that unites these four elements. Namely, Serbian leadership dominates over political institutions based on the

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<sup>825</sup> Ibid., p. 347

<sup>826</sup> Ibid., pp.58-79

political position of the political parties they represent, and that political environment significantly shapes their worldview. Moreover, the Serbian political parties remain the most influential power centre within a Serbian polity known for weak and dysfunctional domestic institutions. The political parties remain the only effective transmission belt between the state and society. This study has established that party politics act as an intervening variable. Still, it diverges from the NCR scholarship that takes into account party politics but fails to consider the process of competition between them. This study considers this competition process between Serbian elites and political parties, which impacts how systemic pressures are being translated into foreign policy, thus qualifying Serbian party politics as the intervening variable.

Based on the fact that there are systemic and domestic forces at play, it was also possible to apply an analytical narrative method within this study: as the independent and intervening variables are the analytical benchmarks, an empirical account was possible but with thematic and analytical subplots. Serbian relations with three relevant great powers, the EU, the US and Russia, could be described through the lenses of systemic and domestic factors.

### **8.3 The Main Findings and Arguments - Summary**

The research uncovered the systemic forces shaping the Serbian balancing act and Belgrade's interaction with three relevant global powers, the EU, the US, and Russia. These forces are the independence of Kosovo and the power vacuum in the Balkans. First, the independence of Kosovo is a turning point for Serbian foreign policy, forcing Belgrade to recalibrate this policy and its relations with both the West and Russia.

The second systemic factor impacting the Serbian balancing act is the power vacuum in the Balkans, which has been in play since the global financial crisis of 2008 and deepened with the migrant crisis and Brexit. These crises impeded the EU's ability to enlarge to the Balkans, creating an open space that enabled Russia to play a more assertive role. These processes also cemented Serbia's status of being stranded on the Western periphery. In those circumstances, Serbia tried to balance the West and Russia against each other, with

the end game of gaining leverage and increasing its bargaining power with the EU and the US.

However, while these two factors remain consistent during the designated period between 2008 and 2020, they still do not provide a full systemic context. They do not explain the variations in Serbian balancing at various stages covered with the empirical chapters. The study established that the systemic force that helps explain the variations in the form and intensity of Serbian balancing is the state of relations between Russia and the West. Namely, if these relations are cooperative, the Serbian balancing act can be conducted relatively calmly without any strategic tensions. However, if these relations become adversarial, Serbian balancing becomes more visible and turbulent due to a more dangerous systemic environment.

These systemic factors shaped the Serbian balancing act during the selected historical stages. The first stage was between 2008 and 2012 when the Serbian balancing act began. The Serbian balancing act is also a policy with nuances and differences in intensity. This assertion was empirically proven between 2012 and 2014 when the Serbian balancing act operated smoothly and without significant crises. The period between 2014 and 2020 is the final and most significant empirical stage when Belgrade's balancing was most pronounced in its openness and intensity. The main reason why this period was the pinnacle of the Serbian balancing act in its visibility and intensity was the rivalry between Russia and the West. The increased rivalry between the two sides from the Ukraine Crisis of 2014 made the Serbian systemic and regional environment more dangerous.

The process tracing methodology and interviews with human sources established that Serbian party politics intersect with the country's foreign policy in three ways, thus acting as an intervening variable, a conduit for systemic influences. Firstly, Serbian leaders avoid any unpopular policies, like being soft on Kosovo or tough on Russia—thus avoiding damaging themselves and their political parties. Secondly, Serbian leaders want to win over pro-Western and pro-Russian voters by promoting themselves as facilitators of friendship with those powers. Thirdly, Serbia's political elites believe that by gaining support from the EU, US and Russia, they gain the advantage over their political

competitors needed to win power. The party politics as the intervening variable operating at the domestic level of analysis also provided a sub-plot within the analytical narrative through which Serbian relations with three relevant powers, the EU, the US and Russia, can be viewed. Consequently, domestic hurdles impede the ability of Serbian leaders to get support for any other foreign policy platform, except one based on balancing.

The Serbian party scene was recomposed in the wake of a political crisis generated by Kosovo's independence that became the dominant issue and point of the partisan divide. During the period 2008 to 2012, the balancing act became a domestic necessity as foreign policy issues like the Kosovo dispute, relations with the EU, US, NATO and Russia became part of the inter-party competition. Party politics also played a significant role in the period between 2012 and 2014 and between 2014 and 2020, when Serbia marked an illiberal turn. This combination of systemic and domestic forces has conditioned the Serbian balancing act, and it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

#### **8.4 Contribution to the Field**

The thesis contributes to the domain of NCR, Balkan studies, and IR in general. This research contributes to the field of NCR not by adding another case study to the list but by the nature of the selected case. Serbia is an interesting case study in terms of both systemic and domestic forces that are in play. Regarding systemic factors, if one of the purposes of NCR is to analyse anomalies to neorealism, Serbia is the perfect example. After all, neorealism would expect a small state with insufficient power capabilities to bandwagon with the West. However, Serbian behaviour is different, arising the need for NCR analysis, whose scope is expanded because NCR scholarship has been overwhelmingly focused on policies of great powers.

At the same time, by examining the domestic background of Serbian foreign policy, NCR profits as one can develop insights into how domestic politics filter systemic pressures in a country with a hybrid political system, not fitting into the democracy-autocracy dichotomy. More importantly, a polity based on partisanship and interest groups plays a role in how systemic influences are distorted. As such, this study fills the gap, criticised

by Peter Trubowitz, that NCR discounts foreign policy's distributional and electoral role in domestic politics.

In terms of Balkan studies, the greatest contribution of the thesis is empirical. The research identified key changes in the Serbian systemic environment (both global and regional) that have shaped the country's place in the world and its region since 2008. Empirically, these changes are key turning points in Serbia's recent diplomatic history, including the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, the global financial crisis that same year and the crisis in Ukraine of 2014. Based on this finding, it was possible to identify the dominant trend of Serbian foreign policy at this moment in history. That trend is Belgrade's tendency to hedge and avoid full tilt towards either the West or Russia.

Through this study, the Balkan scholarship can familiarise itself with domestic dynamics influencing Serbian foreign policy. On that front, the study contributes to the field by providing input on the character and development of the Serbian polity, including in its current illiberal form. More importantly, it shows the competition between political parties to be the missing piece of the puzzle, explaining why Serbia responds the way it does to its external challenges.

This approach resulted in a thesis that places research on Serbia and the Balkans in the wider context of IR. The use of NCR, including systemic and domestic factors in its causal mechanism, sheds light on the forces shaping not just the Serbian balancing act, one of the dominant traits of Serbian policy, but its foreign policy as a whole. The thesis also places Serbia and the Balkans, a country and region that have been outside the geopolitical mainstream except for regional specialists, into the global context. The study shows how the global dynamics involving great powers like the EU, the US, and Russia affect the neglected region and how local nations like Serbia operate when they face those global effects reaching their regional neighbourhood. With that in mind, this study also provides the potential for future research.



## **8.5 Possible Avenues of Future Research**

The use of NCR and its ability to integrate the intervening variable into the realist, systemic logic provided a very elaborate manner to analyse Serbian policy of balancing between Russia and the West during the designated period. This does not mean that all the avenues for future research on this topic have been exhausted with this study. On the contrary, Serbian foreign policy can provide a strong incentive for future research, offering options for both empirical and theoretical research.

The researchers dealing with Serbia, the Balkans and European geopolitics who approach these issues from the empirical policy standpoint can profit from this study. However, they can also build upon it for the future. The Serbian balancing act is not fully complete with the period covered in this study. Serbia is still burdened with the Kosovo dispute, leaving Russia in the game in the Western Balkans. Those interested in US and Russian foreign policy can also draw knowledge from this study and try to develop further insights about considerations guiding the US and Russia in those regions which are not at the forefront of world media. Those who chose to explore other aspects of Serbian foreign policy can draw insights from this study on patterns and factors behind Belgrade's foreign policy. In doing so, future research must consider that even though they lack the power capabilities of the global powers they engage with, countries like Serbia are not merely pawns of great power politics. Instead, such countries try to manoeuvre within those systemic circumstances.

Future research on this topic needs to take into account local agency. The project took into account the state agency by using NCR as a theoretical framework and by integrating the intervening variable. Some other NCR authors might find an interest in other aspects of Serbian foreign policy. In analysing this behaviour, they can expand on the foundation left by this study by integrating other potential unit-level intervening variables. The identity or the ideology of Serbian nationalism are just some of the potential candidates for the intervening variable that can be attractive for NCR scholars tempted to research the Serbian case in the future.

There are naturally other theoretical approaches that can also profit from this project and analyse the unit-level factors only from a different perspective. NCR stands in between Innenpolitik theories that stress domestic politics and unit-level factors, and realist theories that emphasise the international system. The Innenpolitik theorists that engage with the political regime's nature, domestic interest groups and state-society relations should pay more attention to countries like Serbia.

Countries like Serbia have a complex and turbulent socio-political history that prevented the full emergence of mature civil society and liberal democracy with the rule of law and functioning independent institutions. The historical evolution of the Serbian polity and its endgame is even more challenging for researchers given the complicated nature of Yugoslav communism, the legacy of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, and the incomplete political and economic transition in Serbia. With this chaotic and unpredictable domestic politics, Innenpolitik theories can gain new knowledge and devise new ideas on how the domestic political environment shapes its external policies. Serbia's current status as a hybrid regime makes the country an even more significant challenge for Innenpolitik scholarship. By examining the domestic political environment, particularly party politics, this thesis lays the groundwork for further research into other aspects of the Serbian political system that may impact Serbian foreign policy. The lack of a civic, political culture - that is a must for the functioning of genuine liberal, constitutional democracy - the nature of Serbian political economy and public administration and its impact on the country's foreign policy can also be developed further based on the findings of this study.

NCR also stands in between the materialist tradition associated with realism and ideational approaches that emphasise perceptions, ideas and identities. In their focus on identities, the constructivists can also be among those who might profit from studying the Serbian balancing act and Belgrade's policies towards great powers. While NCR does not entirely discount the role that ideas and identities play in domestic politics and foreign policy, NCR is focused on their use as instruments in the power struggle among various groups and not on the process of identity formation and social construction. This leaves an opening for the constructivists to explore the role of identities and strengthen their school of thought even further. The evolution of ideas and the influence of culture on

foreign policy among the Serbian elite is another avenue that should be of interest to the social constructivists. The role of strategic culture is also another avenue of potential research that might be of equal interest to realists and constructivists. If parochial interests and opportunistic parties dominate the Serbian polity, what type of strategic culture is formed in that environment?

FPA scholarship can also find salience in the case of Serbia, particularly the scholarship that deals with the role of cognition, perceptions of the leadership, and historical analogies. These analytical approaches can provide an even more complex picture and enrich the existing scholarship by analysing Serbian policies and Serbia's relations with great powers through the individual level of analysis. Due to its small size and the fact that the Balkans is not in the focus of the global public, Serbia is not frequently a subject of scholarly IR inquiry, except for Balkan specialists. However, the country's complex history, unpredictable domestic and external environment creates an equally surprising foreign policy behaviour whose study can help enrich the knowledge base of the IR discipline.

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